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Doctor Di at the Crossroads

By
Anne Vinton



CHAPTER ONE

THE hospital was literally sited at the crossroads, though set back from the street by a drive of about a hundred and fifty yards and cushioned by rounded shrubs and a belt of trees which helped to absorb the noise of the traffic.

There was a large new roundabout and a sign which gave the distances to both Edinburgh and London, Great Yarmouth and Liverpool, for besides being at the crossroads, St. John's was also sited roughly at the heart of England, the highways resembling vast arteries pouring the flood tide of commerce and private pleasure in four entirely different directions.

Diana Wills often sat on the brand new seat outside the hospital gates and thought vagrant thoughts. At one time she had watched the workmen constructing the roundabout, which was to put St. John's Casualty Department out of operation—in theory, at least. She would think of herself as a stranger in these parts studying these crossroads.

Which one to take?

"If I were needing a job I'd go to London, of course," she went on. "There are all sorts of wonderful jobs in London and I could take my pick, whereas in Yarmouth one has to know something about fishing and in Liverpool they'd want sea-farers. I don't think I'd go to Edinburgh unless I was a Scot and wanting to get home, or perhaps a student studying to be a doctor, and I already know all about that."

Being at a crossroads was unsettling, she also decided. One felt as though one hadn't arrived anywhere. True, St. John's was on the outskirts of Farlingham, a small, prosperous North Midlands town, but apart from the inhabitants everybody else regarded Farlingham as a spot where one could fill up the car, have a cup of tea and go on to somewhere else with vastly more to offer in the way of opportunity and entertainment.

It was getting too cool for sitting on the seat by early October, Di decided, as she collected her various items of

shopping—she never carried a basket—and prepared to go inside for tea. She felt chilled to the bone and somewhat depressed. Normally she looked forward to her days off, an expedition into town, a visit either to her hairdresser or the cinema and Nigel dashing out to join her for either luncheon or tea in his screaming red M.G.

She was engaged to Nigel, had been for two years. Sometimes they talked on the theme of "when we get married", and then all was wonderful, and perhaps it had only been a slip of the tongue when Nigel had said, only last evening, "If we get married, old girl, you'll have to stop that lark, I can tell you!"

She couldn't remember what they had been talking about or which "lark" she would have to stop, only that significant tiny word shouted into her very soul a horn of warning, and with it was coupled a disembodied fragment of information, which now took on an ominous significance: Nigel had been seen in Farlingham on an occasion he had sworn he had been standing in for Luke Parsons at his surgery in Little Phelpham.

Now Nigel had every right to go where he liked during his off-duty periods when she was not free; this much they had conceded one to the other. They rarely found they were off duty together, and the situation would have been intolerable had there not been some give and take about their relationship.

So when Nigel had told her about taking Luke's evening surgery she had said, "Bless you! I hope Luke is suitably grateful, darling."

"Oh, well," he shrugged diffidently. "I like the work. One gets plenty of variety and it's a change."

Nigel was the hospital's Junior Medical Officer.

"You won't be free about nine, I suppose, to meet for supper somewhere?" she had asked hopefully.

"Hardly likely, my sweet. Luke's surgery goes on for hours. If they get in before eight-thirty, even though they're standing on one another's toes,

I've got to see 'em. If I am free, though, I'll give you a ring. O.K.?"

"O.K.," she had replied readily.

So how could Nigel have been at the Load of Trouble roadhouse, dancing with a blonde at eight-thirty that very evening?

"No," she told Phil Gubbins, a junior houseman, "it wasn't Nigel you saw, my lad."

"It was Nigel's car, anyway. NUF 121."

"He probably loaned his car to somebody, Phil. He's always doing that."

Young Gubbins shrugged.

"I didn't see his face, Di, but it certainly looked like Nigel from the back. D.J. and all. Of course such as I couldn't afford to go into the Load of Trouble."

"Neither can Nigel," smiled Diana. "He's saving up to get married. Remember?"

"I remember," quipped the houseman, meaning no offence, "but does he? That blonde was something."

"Anybody I know?" she smiled.

"I think so. I got a good look at her. But if Nigel wasn't there it isn't important, is it?"

"No," Di said immediately. "It isn't at all important."

But after that slight slip of the tongue on Nigel's part she had realised it was important enough for her to have remembered, and it was as though a red mist veiled her usually clear sight and made her think there was an abyss immediately ahead.

"Nigel," she had besought him, "you know that evening you took Luke Parsons' surgery and there was a woman with a cyst on her ear . . .?"

"Ye-es?" he lowered his eyes and kissed her on the mouth, an act of devotion he didn't over-indulge. "What about it, my sweet?"

"Well," she laughed suddenly in an upsurging of relief, "that stupid Gubbins boy thought he saw you at the Load of Trouble. With a blonde, too. Imagine!"

Nigel was frowning. He looked distinguished when he frowned; boyishly handsome at other times.

"Really?" Nigel cocked one eyebrow. "Actually she was brunette at the roots and I had a redhead on the other arm. He would have told you this, too?"

"No," she laughed. "He didn't actually see you. Because it was your

car I suppose he presumed it was you, all dressed up in your dinner suit."

"My white or my black?" Nigel enquired. "Now I wonder which I wore at that particular surgery?"

"You are a fool, darling," Di said happily. "I shall take great pleasure in telling that young man exactly what you were doing that evening."

"No, don't," he said, after kissing her again. "I rather like to have the housemen think of me as a two-timing Don Juan. I'm such a dull fellow, really."

"Dull?" She couldn't believe it. Self-deprecation was not one of Nigel's usual attributes. "You need your holiday, darling. I only wish I could go with you!"

"Doctor Wills, if you're making improper suggestions . . .?"

"It would make me more interesting, I suppose?" she enquired archly.

"No, it wouldn't!" he almost snapped, surprising her. "You sounded like somebody else for a moment there. It doesn't become you to behave like a—a tart, Di."

"Nigel——!" she gasped. "I didn't mean to behave like anything of the kind. I was only joking."

"Well, don't. It's miserable enough my having to take my leave in the autumn without you trying to be bright and gay about it. I'm going with a shooting party. What else can I do at this time of year? I can't ask you up because it's a strictly stag affair."

"I know. I didn't expect——"

"Well, don't keep hinting, then. You wish you could come with me; you hope I'll miss you; you can't imagine the hospital without me for three weeks, etcetera, etcetera!"

Diana's face was drained of colour. She was almost angry for a moment.

"Am I expected not to mind your going away for three weeks?" she asked simply.

"I would mind if you didn't," he told her grimly, and tugged her fiercely into his arms. "You're right, pet. I do need this leave. I'm bad-tempered and broody and going out with brash blondes. I don't deserve you."

"Darling!" her voice caressed him. "Moments like this make all the waiting worth while. When we're married we won't have these explosions of emotion, will we?"

"No." He eyed her strangely. "I wish we were married, Di. Like a

patient wishes his operation was over."

Again her laughter trilled.

"Marriage isn't as bad as an operation, Nigel!"

"Isn't it?" he rose and smoothed himself down. "Ask any bridegroom-to-be. Anyhow, *that* particular problem isn't looming at the moment, thank God!"

Problem . . . ? looming . . . ?

"Are we discussing a marriage or a burial?" she asked, hardly believing he could be serious. "Surely marrying me isn't going to be all that bad?" If it is—" she laughed uncertainly—"you can have your ring back."

She loosened the half-hoop of diamonds on her left hand third finger and held it out to him, still playfully. Without a glimmer of amusement in his own eyes, however, he took it, looking moodily beyond her.

"Perhaps it's as well if you don't wear it for a bit, Di," he told her.

"But I want it!" she protested. "It's my ring."

"You just gave it back to me."

"I didn't! I was joking. You know I was joking, Nigel."

"You shouldn't joke about serious things like engagements."

"Don't be such a baby!"

They were going to have an open quarrel any minute, and she knew it. Almost in desperation she appealed, "Will you meet me at the gate, four o'clock tomorrow?"

"Why?" he enquired, combing his thick, tawny hair.

"To bring me up for tea, of course. I just thought."

"I'll see," he told her, and suddenly seized her in an embrace which really hurt. "Without your ring it's just like kissing somebody else's girl," he decided wickedly, and kissed her again, somewhat startled to receive a sharp slap for his pains.

"If I were somebody else's girl that's what you'd get," she flashed at him, and so had left him, on her dignity and not seeing the look of admiration and revelation which had followed her slim young figure out of sight.

"Mine," Nigel Lester had decided with a sigh of satisfaction, and then regarded the ring which he retrieved from his pocket. "At a price," he concluded, with some bitterness.

Thus had they parted the previous evening, and now Diana was trailing

up the gravelled drive to the hospital alone. Of course one couldn't say for certain when a doctor would be free during the day; tea was served from four until five-thirty in the residents' common-room, which proved the elasticity of medical commitments. Something had cropped up which required Nigel's attention, she was convinced, or he would have granted her small request to be met at the gates. They often had such a rendezvous, for there was just time to smoke a cigarette, if one walked slowly, between road and hospital.

She entered the grey granite building by a side door and met Miss Rambler, the Matron, who immediately looked like a very junior probationer caught with her hair all over her collar.

"Doctor Wills—" she greeted, at a loss—"have you just come in?"

"Yes, Matron."

"Oh, dear. I mean, the S.M.O. is waiting in the main hall to catch you—to tell you. I'm not doing this very well, but I'm upset, you see."

Diana pondered on the horror of circumstances which could not only upset Matron but apparently affect her also.

"What has happened, please, Matron?" she asked calmly, her hands clenched, nevertheless. "You'd better tell me."

"Well, you see, there was this shooting accident. Doctor Lester was—was cleaning his gun when it—went off."

Diana heard and her apparent calmness belied the thunder of her thoughts.

"Is—is Nigel dead?" she heard her voice ask, rather as she might have asked if it was raining.

"Oh, good gracious, no!" Matron said reassuringly, and added for good measure in a voice full of meaning, "There's been no fatality. She'll be all right in time, too."

In the first throes of relief and thankfulness Diana did not give heed to the rest of Matron's statement. She accepted a chair in that worthy's private office, dutifully sipped a tot of neat brandy and proceeded to hear how the accident had happened.

"Obviously poor Doctor Lester was a little upset at the time," Matron decided, "but you must not reproach yourself at all, my dear. How were you to know such a thing would be the outcome of a lovers' tiff?"

"Tiff?" Diana asked faintly. "I'm

sorry, Matron. You must think I'm being deliberately stupid and obstructive, but when I think of a gun going off in Nigel's face——!" she shuddered afresh.

"No, in *her* face," Matron corrected gently. "He got off very lightly. Slight burns only, on one arm."

"He told us all about it," Matron went on softly, realising she might have to tell the story in words of one syllable before it finally went in, "how you had quarrelled, and returned his ring, which was why he asked Cynthia—that is, Nurse Raynham—into his chalet . . ." As Diana still stared Miss Rambler said rather sharply ". . . her presence required *some* explanation, didn't it? I don't allow my girls to visit the residents in their private quarters and well—they know it! But apparently Nurse Raynham has a most sympathetic ear, according to Doctor Lester, and so they broke the rule. A rule, I wager, that girl will wish, now, she had obeyed to the letter!"

Diana looked away, as though not hearing Matron's voice droning on. Another voice spoke into her stunned consciousness: "That blonde was something . . . I got a good look at *her*. But if Nigel wasn't there it isn't important, is it?"

Now it was all so terribly important as to be positively frightening. Nigel had never been near Luke Parsons' surgery on the evening in question: there had been no woman with an aural cyst. Those were the lies he had told, to be with Cynthia Raynham, the "smashing blonde" whom Phil Gubbins had really seen dancing with Nigel at the *Load of Trouble*.

Perhaps the whole hospital knew of or suspected Nigel's infidelity.

Humiliation struggled with the desolation in her breast. She tried to think of reasons why Cynthia Raynham should be in Nigel's chalet, other than those which sprang immediately to the hospital staff's mind and gave them something to gossip about. Nigel could have made a friend of Nurse Raynham. This she could not honestly believe, however, for the girl was not the type to be content with platonic arrangements with members of the opposite sex. She was a girl in whom the female showed uppermost: she wore her hair short enough to comply with regulations, but kept it beautifully dressed beneath her diminutive cap, and it was a byword among the junior nurses that she spent

"oodles" on keeping it blonde, being mouse-brown by nature.

Matron had told her to lie down and given her a sedative, but though she was lying fully clothed on her bed her brain refused to accept the anodyne afforded by the drug she had taken. It leapt about like a mad thing imprisoned in her inert body, questioning, recapitulating, reasoning, turning back on the conclusions it drew until a sudden peremptory knock on her door was almost a blessed relief.

"Nigel!" she began to weep, seeing the white-coated figure through a blur of tears. "Thank God you've come!"

"It isn't—I mean I'm not Nigel," came an all too familiar voice, somewhat curtly. "I came to see if you're fit for duty, Miss Wills. Can you help me in Theatre?"

In a flash Diana was up on her feet, wiping the weakness of tears away from her cheeks with her fingers.

"Sir!" she said, like a soldier coming to attention. "I didn't know you were in the hospital."

"I wasn't until I received a peremptory summons right in the middle of my afternoon nap, Miss Wills: a nap, I may add, well deserved on account of a most disturbed night spent in repairing the effects of a smashed windscreens on two extremely comely female countenances. The car, even after collision with a wall, was in better fettle. But I don't suppose you're interested in my nocturnal perambulations other than as they affect St. John's, and yourself. This afternoon's performance concerns you much more intimately, I gather?"

Robert Taunton, dark-haired and moustached, was a surgeon of no mean répute and a consultant at St. John's. He did most of the plastic surgery required, and Diana assisted at all his operations. After two years she felt she knew him little better than the day she had first met him. He was a grand surgeon and a strong, independent personality; he was as hard as granite and as friendly as a lion with toothache. Rumour about him was rife at all levels in the hospital: from the kitchens came the news that he had been married but that his wife had left him after a month: the nurses added to this a beautiful only child who was hopelessly crippled and the only human being who could stir that flint-like heart. A houseman had informed Diana, in confidence, that "Rob" Taunton had

been suggested for inclusion in the New Year Honours' List, but had firmly rejected the idea and offended the recommending body for life!"

How much of this—if any—was true? Diana didn't know, and yet she was perhaps as close to him as it was possible for any human being to be.

This was the first time he had ever visited her in her room. She wondered, in the midst of all her confusion and distress, why he hadn't, on this occasion, sent a messenger.

"I strongly advocate," he now declared, "that fools and children should be kept away from guns for everyone's sake. But only children are protected by the letter of the law, unfortunately."

She almost bridled at his calling Nigel a fool, but bit her lip instead.

"So if you're ready, Miss Wills, we will proceed to remove several extremely painful 'foreign bodies' from Nurse Raynham's countenance."

He took a step towards the door, which he hadn't closed behind him, and indicated that he was waiting for her to precede him.

"I'm not on duty today, sir," she said somewhat curtly. "Doctor Thain is available, though."

He turned back, this time closing the door with a slam and looking thunderstruck.

"I'm perfectly aware who is available, Miss Wills, as I'm also aware of whom I *prefer* should assist me. You will come along now, please, at once!"

"Sir, I can't!" she said, feeling like a drowning person. "You don't understand and I can't explain. I won't assist with—with *her*!" She turned her back on him, her shoulders heaving as she breathed hard.

"So," he said tensely, "you refuse, do you? Why shouldn't I 'understand', as you put it? I understand only too well that you've been a stupid, blind little fool for longer than I care to think; that you're well out of any contract which involves you with a spineless quack who thinks more of his escapades as a Don Juan than his future as an extremely mediocre G.P., and that having worked hard to engineer the saving of your face and pride in this sordid affair, I don't intend that you should let me down by pining so very patently in your room while the maids tiptoe by and recount having heard your

sighing and sobbing to other interested romantics."

Diana flared angrily, "I don't intend to be heard sighing and sobbing!" She flushed suddenly, remembering the way she had greeted him, thinking him to be Nigel. "I didn't know you knew about me—us—sir, and what do you mean by saying *you* engineered the saving of my face? I thought Nigel was telling everybody that I'd quarrelled with him and returned his ring?"

"I was called to a scene of utter pandemonium," Robert Taunton told her levelly, "in which one of the principal characters was grovelling on the floor in a mess of gore, looking much worse than she actually was, and the other was bewailing the fact that the unfortunate accident compromised *him*. Naturally I suggested it would do him more credit to restrain his natural concern for himself and think firstly of the victim of his carelessness, and secondly of his fiancée, who would doubtless expect some sort of explanation. Eventually I elicited the fact of the returned ring, which he kept merely to sulk over a little, and I persuaded him to state that there had been a break between you, with this result . . ."

Diana's eyes blazed.

"You have a damned cheek, sir!"

He shrugged and smiled in an amused way. "You'll thank me one day, Miss Wills. Care to bet?"

"I—I—I—" She was absolutely lost for words, and yet, somehow, it was a relief to be angry instead of miserable.

When she had simmered down a little she was dutifully in Theatre, scrubbed up and well aware of the theatre staff's interested regard of her.

She enquired of her chief and he told her there was no reason why Nurse Raynham's sight should be more than temporarily affected. He kept up a running commentary the while he was working, and continually consulted her, which was unusual, for he invariably told her this or that was *so* and expected her to agree with him or at least keep her divergent opinions to herself.

When the emergency session in Theatre was over Diana was surprised to find she was less shattered by the day's events than she had expected to be. She had no illusions but that her affair with Nigel was over, for trust had died, and mutual understanding and trust are a large part of loving.

In the wash-room she heard the theatre staff nurse say to her junior, "I know for a fact she hasn't been to see poor Doctor Lester yet. I suppose she's too ashamed . . ."

The conversation had died abruptly when her presence was detected, which was significant enough.

"They're blaming *me* for everything," she thought angrily, washing with a great deal of energy to work off steam. "I, who am the most injured party of all!"

Robert Taunton emerged from the surgeon's changing-room and boomed cheerfully across the width of the theatre where a nurse was busily mopping up.

"I'm expecting you to dinner tomorrow evening, Miss Wills. Eight o'clock O.K.?"

Diana was not on social terms with the consultant and her mouth dropped open as the rest of the theatre staff, out of sight but within earshot, awaited her reply.

Tossing her head, she decided to give them something to talk about.

"Very well, sir," she said clearly, regaining her composure. "Eight o'clock will suit me."

They left the theatre together and immediately pandemonium broke out.

"I must say she's not wasting any time," Nurse Lennox opined. "Off with the old love and on with the new, it seems."

"But who'd have thought Robbie had designs on her?" Staff Nurse Gillibrand enquired indignantly. "A cosy dinner for two, indeed, and poor Doctor Lester lying weak from shock and sorrow in P.P. twenty-two! If you ask me . . .!"

"Nurses," Theatre Sister said sharply, "stop gossiping wildly about the staff and get on with your work, please. We've been asked not to chatter about today's unfortunate episode. Is that the sterilizer about to explode? Staff Nurse—really!" and Theatre Sister stalked off, having said her say, to see what further news could be garnered from her fellows in the Sisters' residential wing of the vast hospital.

Diana went to bed at ten o'clock, after deciding that she had played the part of face-saving before the hospital's gimlet eyes quite long enough for one day. Now she could really let herself go, think on all she had lost and have a good weep into her pillow.

But it was not to be. She had barely donned her pyjamas when a tap at her door revealed Night Sister, an austere, nun-like woman with a face resembling the Madonna and a temper which belied this benign appearance.

"I'm sorry to be disturbing ye, Doctor," the Irish brogue came primly, "but there's himself asking for ye and won't be settled for the night. As I told him myself, 'Doctor,' I says, 'I don't care how much the day staff coddles and spoils ye, but you'll behave yourself while *I'm* on nights,' I says 'and make no mistake about that.' 'So I will,' he says, as nice as pie, 'if I can just see Doctor Wills for a minute.' 'She'll be in bed by this time, if she's any sense,' I tells him. 'Just mention my name,' he says, 'an' she'll come an' tuck me up.' 'Well? What do ye say, Doctor?'"

Diana didn't know how much Night Sister had heard or what she believed. Somehow she didn't care at this juncture. But it was important to the night staff that all patients should be settled for a few hours before the fever of activity which heralded the dawn. Whatever Nigel had to say to her was better said and over, then could follow the necessary adjustments.

"Very well, Sister," she said, "I'll have to dress again, I suppose . . ."

"Naturally," agreed Night Sister.

When she had been escorted to the private patients' wing, where sick medical staff were given VIP treatment, Diana dismissed Sister with, "I'll see Doctor Lester alone, if you don't mind, and I'll settle him down for you within fifteen minutes."

"Di!" Nigel exclaimed, half eagerly and half questioningly. "I—I knew you'd come! Why haven't you been before?"

She looked at him a little helplessly.

"Was I supposed to?" she asked, and after glancing at his medical notes, added bitterly, "you're not suffering from amnesia, I see!"

"Di!" he said, urgently, and seizing one of her hands he tugged her dangerously close so that she sat down on the bed, despite herself. "I still love you, old girl. You know that. Well, you do, don't you?" he insisted.

"Do I?" she enquired, wondering when he was going to apologise, offer some explanation for all that had occurred.

"It was that brute Taunton's idea to set it around that you'd given me the

air, not mine." He looked engagingly boyish in his pyjamas, but her heart was cold. So cold it almost frightened her. "Well, say something!" he urged her.

"That's what I'm waiting for you to do, Nigel," she told him. "Say something I haven't heard secondhand."

He looked blankly at her for a moment. "Oh! you mean about Cynthia?" he asked, and pulled a face like a child who is asked to take a dose of castor oil and knows there is no getting out of it. "Well—" he shrugged—"these things just happen, don't they?"

"What things?" she asked coldly.

"Well, Cynthia and me. Oh, come!" he tugged at her persuasively. "She was never any threat to *you*, sweetheart. It was only a bit of relaxation and fun."

"Couldn't you have relaxed with *me* instead of making fictitious appointments with Luke Parsons and his surgery?"

He began to look worried. Diana had always been the one to appeal to him; now the boot was suddenly on the other foot.

"Di! stop this third degree!" he pleaded. "I'll tell you the truth of the matter. I did break a date with you once to take this little madam to a dance. I'd heard she was the doctors' good companion; you know? Easy on the eye and in every other way. Well, once was more than enough, but she—she threatened to tell you if I didn't see her again, so it sort of drifted on. She didn't expect me to give you up for her . . ."

"Very generous of her," Diana decided.

"In fact I'm rather glad about this afternoon," he went on defiantly, "because I hated deceiving you, Di. It'll be a seven days' wonder and then things will die down and we can make a fresh start. What do you say?"

Doctor Wills, however, had risen and was obviously having difficulty finding words.

"Nigel," she blazed suddenly, "I'd like to have you horsewhipped! You've summoned me here at this hour with apparently no intention other than to justify your horrid little intrigue in my eyes. You're not even sorry, unless it's because you've been found out and realise you can no longer have your cake and eat it. You haven't even expressed concern over—over Nurse Raynham's condition . . ."

"It was her fault, jabbing my arm

as she did. Anyhow, she's going to be all right."

"I've been assisting with her in Theatre," Diana said acidly, and as he looked up, startled, "Yes, I've taken as much humiliation as I can absorb today, Nigel. She'll be all right, perhaps, because of the expert treatment she's receiving. She may carry her scars for years, however, and she's only twenty-four. I think she's being well and truly punished for any wrong she may have done anyone, but you—" her eyes blazed afresh—"you expect to come out of it scot free!"

"Di, this isn't like you," he said uneasily. "You're supposed to be settling me down for the night, not agitating me."

She controlled herself with an effort.

"I'll recommend that you have a couple of capsules to help you to sleep, but if you expect a soothing lullaby from me, you've got the wrong girl, Doctor Lester. Perhaps you've had the wrong girl for a long time. You must have had, or your eyes wouldn't have roved in other directions. The hospital grapevine has spread the news that we've quarrelled and I returned your ring . . ."

"Thanks to Taunton!" Nigel sneered.

"Thanks to whoever it was I found the story more palatable to work with than the miserable truth. I shan't deny the story, Nigel, and as far as I'm concerned all is over between us. Now, goodnight, and please have consideration for the staff."

"What the heck . . .!" she closed the door on him before she could hear more of the tirade, and stood for a moment breathing hard, her eyes swimming as she realised she had lost not only a sweetheart but a great deal of her faith in human nature as a result of this day's work.

Di was feeling more resigned to her fate after another day's work, and beginning to count her blessings once more. Now that she was no longer engaged to Nigel there was no longer the question of giving up her job, and this realisation brought a profound thankfulness rather than otherwise.

Di had decided to be a doctor, like her father, at the early age of eleven, and she had never been deflected from her life's purpose by any distraction until Nigel had used his physical influence over her to hint there was no room for two doctors in the household he planned to maintain when he married.

Now she was free of all that, and

knew her father would be more glad than sorry the engagement was a thing of the past.

Though Doctor James Wills was the senior partner of a group of G.P.s in a busy south-eastern town, Diana was now in her second surgical year and more inclined to this side of medicine than the other. Often she and her father argued on the merits and demerits of the various branches open to young doctors, and of course Doctor Wills, senior, would have liked his daughter to be ready to step into his shoes when he retired. But she had not only taken the first of the surgical diploma examinations but was bent on studying the fancy work, these days—plastic surgery, no less.

"Surely you're not going to spend your life giving stupid, vain women new noses, Di?" her father had demanded at their last meeting.

"I hope not, Daddy," she had replied spiritedly, "but there's more to it than that. Last week we had a child brought in who had been thrown through the windscreen of her father's car. You should have seen her poor little face! One eyelid was almost torn off, we removed a three-inch triangle of glass from her cheek and her lower lip was cut in three places. You wouldn't know her today, after Mr. Taunton has had her for only a week . . . I'd like to be able to do things like that. The new noses are merely occupational incidentals."

Today had been Mr. Argyle's Theatre, and she had spent a busy morning and half the afternoon with him, stopping only for a sandwich lunch.

Theatre was always heavy, and as surgical registrar she was required to keep her hand in at all operations, apart from E.N.T.s and Ophthalmics, where even the assistants were specialists. She acted as liaison between consultant and patient, and had her finger literally on the pulse of every case from admission to the day of discharge.

After Theatre she showered and changed, and putting a clean white duty coat over her plain skirt and blouse went on her usual tour of the two surgical wards. Those who had been operated on today were still sleeping, in the main; only one young woman was painfully retching, miserably conscious of freshly severed muscles and tissue in the effort. Diana advised the Ward Sister, who was accompanying her on

her round, that the girl had better be given a sedative if she was the type whose reaction was to vomit, and passed on to the next bed. She was professionally impersonal, but not unfeeling, and was genuinely sorry that old Mrs. Bull, who had been admitted for observation, being unable—in her own words—"to keep anything down", was having such a weary day.

"Always somebody worse, me dear," said Mrs. Bull, being determinedly cheerful. She looked towards the screens behind which a second post-operative case was slowly rallying. "I been saying a prayer for 'em all, poor souls."

"They'll be all right," Diana assured the old woman, not adding that after hearing Sister's report she would think it better if the rest of the ward prayed for poor Mrs. Bull. It was very likely she had a malignant growth in a practically inaccessible place, and such things were extremely testing for both patient and surgeon alike.

After cracking a joke with Mrs. Bull and surreptitiously increasing her dosage of morphia, as directed by the Senior Surgical Officer, Diana called in at the side ward where Nurse Raynham, as a member of the staff, was housed.

One pale blue eye peered resentfully from among the bandages.

"How are you today, Nurse?" Diana asked levelly, glancing at the notes Sister placed in her hands. "I see you didn't sleep. Were you in pain?"

"Of course I was in pain," the girl said dramatically, "but what do you care about me?"

A probationer tapped and entered the room, waiting dutifully for permission to speak to Sister.

"Do please go and attend to whatever is needed, Sister," Diana requested. "I rather think Nurse Raynham wants to get something off her chest."

"Now," Diana proceeded, when they were alone, "why should I feel callous about you, Nurse?"

The girl's one exposed eye glared back defiantly.

"You know why," she said sullenly. "Because I took him—Nigel—from you. He preferred my company."

Diana controlled herself with an effort, hating Nigel for exposing her to humiliations such as these.

"But there was no question of a tug of war between us, for one man's attentions, surely, Nurse? I assure you I

don't want that sort of love. Anyway, Nigel is released from any contract he had with me, so take heart. He's quite, quite free."

The eye was now tear-filled from self-pity.

"I—I don't suppose he—he'll want to look at me now!" the girl snivelled.

"Why shouldn't he? You'll still be as good company, won't you? Anyway, that's no way to talk. Mr. Taunton says there'll be nothing much different about you, in time. I think we can safely say you'll still be quite pretty."

Cynthia Rayham digested this slowly. "You ought to hate me," she decided. "Why don't you?"

"Of course I don't hate you," Diana

quickly assured the other. "You mustn't think you've taken anything from me, Nurse. If any relationship is so lightly lost, as you imagine, it was never worth having in the first place. Now if you're to respond to treatment you *must* sleep, so have I made your mind any easier in any way?"

"Yes, you have, thanks," the other decided after some thought. "I like you a lot better, Doctor Wills, but I think a bit less of myself."

"Well, that's a good start," Diana said encouragingly. "That's when we usually begin the amazingly healing therapy which comes of being more thoughtful for others," and she told the girl the story of old Mrs. Bull and her prayers.

CHAPTER TWO

DIANA had never met Robert Taunton socially, and had meant to cancel their dinner date all day, believing that the invitation had been forthcoming merely as a boost to her ego when it had been at its lowest ebb.

Frankly she would have preferred Mr. Taunton to mind his own business, but one couldn't afford to offend those who could either further or dam one's career while the future was still very much in the balance.

It was only when Surgical A Sister said: "Well, I hear you'll be out this evening, Doctor, but I expect you'll leave your movements chatty with the porter in case you're needed?" that she remembered she had omitted to phone the Taunton ménage with a polite little excuse which would let her out of this most embarrassing commitment.

"Yes, I'll be out, Sister," she languidly agreed. "I'm dining with Mr. Taunton. If we leave his house to go elsewhere I'll ring the hospital." She smiled briefly and sailed away.

Now she was committed, and probably her host would be as disconcerted by her appearance at his dinner table as she fancied she would be herself.

Nevertheless, the affair had its intriguing side. She, who had spoken so airily of "having dinner with Mr. Taunton",

didn't even know where he lived. Fortunately she was spared the embarrassment of having to ask at the porter's lodge, for a letter was stuck into the rack in the main hall bearing his name and both the hospital and his home address.

Yare, the head porter, came along as she was studying the long envelope.

"Nothing for you, Doctor?" he asked. "I got my mail earlier, thank you, Yare. I'm dining with Mr. Taunton this evening. Do you think I should take his letter along?"

"Do that if you would, Doctor. It may be important."

What to wear was the next problem. She hadn't an extensive wardrobe because Nigel had made it quite clear that he expected her to save up towards "this getting married" business. She had, however, quite a nice little sum in the bank and could now afford to indulge in an overdue shopping spree whenever she felt inclined.

Fortunately her hair took care of itself: the more it was brushed the more it shone in natural, shining waves. Her eyes were like pansies and her complexion pale but good. She only needed to touch her lips with the coral red which suited her and don the same nylon velvet dress she had worn at last Christmas's staff dinner, and she was ready. If Mr. Taunton had been at the dinner she

hoped he didn't remember the midnight blue dress, for its very simplicity was striking.

She actually suffered from butterflies in the stomach as she stepped into her small Austin and prepared to venture into the up-town suburb of Wheatfields, round the roundabout and away up Scotland Road for a start. The houses, such as they were, were imposing and shut the road away behind high walls and hedges. The street lighting petered out, but there was no mistaking "Devon Place", for it had its own opalescent lantern clearly indicating the name-plate on the pillar adjoining a pair of wrought-iron gates. These were opened wide.

"Either he is really expecting me or is going out," Diana decided, now not much caring which was the case.

The Taunton Bentley was clearly visible in the garage where a youth was occupied in polishing its perfections.

Diana stepped out of her own modest car and approached the garage.

"Mr. Taunton *does* live here, does he not?" she asked unnecessarily.

"Ay, that's right, miss," came the broad North Midlands accent, "and if you're the young lady he's expecting, you're to go straight in. Side door."

"Well, I think I'm expected," she laughed dubiously. "I was invited to dinner."

Diana stood uncertainly outside the side door of the near-mansion, wondering, like Red Riding Hood, if she really was expected to "lift the bobbin and the latch would fall". Were there no servants to admit visitors?

"Go on in, miss," the youth called encouragingly from the garage. "Master's busy."

Diana entered the house, finding herself in a kind of conservatory, which she decided was much too hot for comfort. A door led from this into a vestibule and somewhere at hand there was obviously a kitchen, for a smell of burning pervaded the air. She sniffed her way towards it hoping that whoever was cooking would kindly direct her where to go.

A scene of utter chaos met her astounded gaze. She had never seen a kitchen like it in her life. It was big and boasted marvellous, up-to-date appointments, but the sink was so piled with dirty dishes that it appeared there had been no washing up done for a fortnight.

Whatever was in the pan on the stove was now charcoal, unrecognisable as food, so she pulled the mess to one side and turned off the gas. The stench made her cough and her eyes streamed, the pan was red-hot and she had burned her fingers.

It was while she was both shaking the injured members and mopping her eyes that Robert Taunton suddenly appeared, looking incongruous in a dinner suit over which he was busily tying an apron.

"Good lord! Who're you?" he asked in astonishment, whipping off the apron and hiding it behind his back. "Why, Miss Wills," he went on accusingly, "I'd never have recognised you dressed in mufti. You look most pretty and attractive."

The compliment startled her into silence, but as her host was now making exasperated noises over the ruinous mess on the gas stove, her lack of immediate response went unnoticed.

"I was told to come straight in, sir," she said suddenly at his elbow, "and as nobody was about I came in here and turned off the gas. I—I'm afraid whatever it is is spoiled, sir."

He smiled suddenly, whimsically.

"That, Miss Wills, must be the understatement of the year. Here you see the remains of two goodly porterhouse steaks. I had already ruined the onions while I was showering. I thought I'd have time to dress before anything else was sacrificed. Apparently I was wrong." He shrugged cheerfully.

"You should have left them under the grill," she now advised him. "Frying pans, unattended, are fatal. Anyhow, fried food is bad for people. You must have told hundreds of your patients that very thing."

"Thanks for the lecture," he told her, with smiling hauteur. "It doesn't seem to have occurred to you, Miss Wills, that we aren't going to get our dinner as planned. I don't know about you, but I'm ravenous."

"I take it this is your cook's day off?" she questioned, looking again at the disorderly kitchen.

"I've been four days without a cook," he now explained. "I don't mind telling you, Miss Wills, that I have difficulty with the staff problem. I've never been properly house-trained, you see, and the exigencies of my occupation, dashing from one hospital to another, and thence to my private clinic, have driven a succession of cooks, cook-housekeepers

and cook-generals into a state of revolt. The agencies tell me that I've now run the gamut of their total supply. I have a very bad name with the agencies."

"Well, look, sir," Diana said impulsively, "I think your need is greater than mine. I had a perfectly adequate lunch," she lied, "but you must be hungry. May I prepare something for you—us? If I may look in your larder . . . ?"

"I say, would you?" he asked eagerly. "I'm sure there's lots of food in tins. Can I help you?"

"Well, perhaps there's something else you could do, sir. For instance, is a table laid somewhere?"

"Oh, lord, no!" he tossed her the apron. "I'll switch the electric fire on in the dining-room."

When Robert Taunton came to see how she was getting on he first sniffed appreciatively and then smiled at the sudden appearance of orderliness all around.

"I say, Miss Wills, it's awfully good of you to buckle to like this," he announced.

Diana laughed.

"You have a consulting-room here, sir?" she enquired.

"No. I do all my interviews at the clinic."

"Then wouldn't you be better in a hotel, sir?" she suggested. "I take it you do live here—alone?"

"Most of the time," he said, somewhat off-handedly. "But I like having my own home," he went on determinedly. "No, I shan't give it up. And anyway, there's Elizabeth at holiday times. I think a young girl needs a home, don't you?"

Elizabeth. Elizabeth must be the "beautiful crippled child" of the hospital's lively imagination.

"Elizabeth is your daughter, sir?" Diana asked innocently.

"No, she isn't," he almost snapped. "I'm not married. I'm an unmarried father," he joked cynically. "My beloved sister married in her teens, died with her husband in their fool of a car at twenty-one and left me with two children to bring up. What chance have I had to get married?" he demanded, then continued confidentially, "I've had dozens of chances, actually, Miss Wills. Women are only too anxious to 'take me over'. My 'housekeepers' invariably develop a 'Mr. Taunton' complex, which is why they eventually

leave in offended haste. But when—or if—I marry, it shall be because I choose to do so, not because I've succumbed to some designing woman's take-over bid."

"You couldn't perhaps be once bitten and twice shy, sir?" Diana asked suddenly, feeling the need to rise in defence of her sex. "Possibly you only imagine most of these women have designs on you."

"Oh, it isn't my opinion alone," he told her. "The matron of my clinic, Joan Hayling, a very nice girl, advises me when to steer clear of somebody. I listen to her, as a rule."

"I'm afraid I should be inclined to suspect Miss Hayling of clearing the way for herself," Diana said calmly. "Hasn't that possibility occurred to you, sir?"

He looked positively astounded, then laughed heartily, breaking a cup in the process.

"Miss Wills, what a feline thing to say! Joan . . . ?" he pondered in silence for a moment. "No! She's the cool, poised type. Anyway, Liz doesn't like her."

"And Liz must be consulted, I gather?" she pressed on, thinking what egotists men were on the whole.

"Of course. If Liz wasn't happy I couldn't be happy. I'm terrified of losing Liz."

"Is she delicate, then?"

"No. No!" he emphasized. "She's fit as a fiddle. Too fit. Too lively. Come on! Let's go and eat and I'll tell you all about Liz. I'd like to share my problems with someone and it's surprisingly easy to talk with you, Miss Wills. The way I've been jabbering on you'd think I was the world's biggest blab, wouldn't you? But that's quite wrong. I've only talked to Joan as I find myself talking to you. It must be the kitchen—the washing up—the way you buckled to . . ."

"Right!" she announced, placing a laden tray in his hands. "You can play butler now, and I'll follow behind with the soup. I hope everything's to your liking, sir."

Robert certainly enjoyed his meal on this occasion and had opened a bottle of vintage wine to go with it.

"Joan sometimes comes over and cooks for me," he said wistfully. "Of course, as she points out, she's a working girl and can't always be spared from the clinic."

"And of course, Liz doesn't like her," Diana added, beginning to feel the beginnings of sympathy for the absent Elizabeth. "You were going to tell me about her, remember?"

"Yes. I'll begin at the beginning. I adored my young sister, Miss Wills. She was in her first year at medical school, whereas I had begun to specialise under Sir Arthur Gallipoli, being seven years her senior. The little fool married a third-year student, while they were both in Edinburgh, and then had to give up her studies because Liz was on the way. Ted had to take the first job offered him, which was as a lab assistant, and so he never actually qualified. Well, of course, this made him rather bitter. The creatures spent their brief married life bewailing their lot rather than making the most of things. In a way it was fortunate the accident took them both together. They'd have separated eventually in any case. I took the children, Liz and baby Pete——"

"There was a baby boy?" Diana interrupted.

"Yes." Robert Taunton's face had grown suddenly grey. "I had them both here, the family house. We had a nanny and I was doing all right. They were happy. Well—kids are meant to be happy, aren't they?"

"Of course they are." Diana was puzzled, and frowned.

"That's why I bought the boy a bike when he was seven. I wanted him to be happy. I wasn't to know he'd wobble out of those gates on to the road and get killed, was I?"

The tragedy rammed home in Diana's brain like an arrow finding its mark.

"Oh, you poor soul!" she said impulsively, reaching over and gripping his hand tightly in her own for an instant. "Of course you weren't. You're not to blame yourself," she said commanding. "It could have happened to anyone at any time, and all little boys crave bikes. How long ago?" she asked softly.

"The longest three years of my life," he confessed with a shudder. "Helena—she was my fiancée at that time—had always insisted Pete was too young for a bike. I don't want to say anything against her, she was a very nice girl, and my unforeseen inheritance of a ready-made family had shaken her considerably. Naturally she picked on the kids a bit, became almost preoccupied with denying

their most modest requests, so I erred the other way and rather over-indulged them. After Pete we—we finished. I couldn't have lived with the possibility of her ever saying 'I told you so'!"

"And Elizabeth?" Diana asked gravely.

"No one will ever know what I went through thinking I might lose Liz, too. I couldn't bear her being out on the street; when I was working I dreaded every summons, thinking there might be another policeman and something under a sheet at the end of it. I went through hell. Which is foolish, of course," he added self-consciously. "You must be thinking I'm a head case, Miss Wills."

"On the contrary, I think you've come through remarkably well, sir. I've worked under you for some time now, and I'd never have suspected you had recently survived such a tragedy. I understand how you felt about Liz, too. The sort of thing that invariably happens to other people had in this case happened to you, and the knowledge begat the fear that the horror could strike again and again. You panicked, naturally, though you kept your panic to yourself. What was the outcome of it?"

"I packed Liz off to boarding school. I thought she'd be safe with all those mams. But she didn't settle and she got out"

"You mean she ran away?"

"She has run away from them all. Three different schools in as many years, and she has run away each time until she has been sacked. All excepting the last one. In this one they're watched night and day"

"It sounds like prison," Diana grimaced.

Robert Taunton raised his eyebrows. "That's what Liz says in every letter," he sighed. "She's miserable and I'm all she's got so she makes me miserable, too."

"How old is she?"

"Thirteen. Just a kid, but amazingly adult at times. Sometimes I panic about the future—her future. She's so pretty and she wants to be a doctor. When I think of her growing up, being turned loose among a lot of horrible medical students"

"I beg your pardon!" Diana said with some spirit. "You're speaking of those who are merely rejuvenations of ourselves when younger. I don't know about you, sir, but I was an extremely

well-behaved medical student. Naturally I chose well-behaved friends, too."

He began to laugh ruefully.

"Thanks for pulling me up, Miss Wills," he said, with a slight inclination of the head in her direction. "I do get rather carried away."

The telephone shrilled suddenly, and while the host went to answer it Diana automatically began to load the soiled dishes on to the tray and went kitchenwards, determined to leave everything washed up and tidy behind her.

She didn't hear him join her and jumped when he spoke.

"The little devil's done it again!" he announced. "That was St. Mary's, and the dormitory Sister has just discovered the hump in the bed isn't Liz at all, but a couple of pillows. Some of the girls have now been persuaded to confess that they lent Liz the money for her train fare home. The Head has suggested that as the girl is so obviously difficult and intractable, as soon as she is assured of her safe arrival, she will be happy to send her clothes home tomorrow. In other words, we've had St. Mary's, too!"

He sounded angry, looked almost fearsome. Diana realised, however, that worry was gnawing at him.

"You're all Liz has," she told him, "and yet you've shut her up away from you. I don't know the girl. She may be spoilt and intractable. But I don't think I could have settled at boarding school, either. I adored my parents. I felt the need to demonstrate my affection every day. I went to the local high school and was very happy. Maybe Liz needs something similar, and if you're worried about educational standards, the local grammar school usually has a high percentage of university scholarship awards."

"But my domestic arrangements!" he groaned, waving his hands in all directions. "Liz needs a woman about the place."

"So do you," Diana said frankly. "Liz can't run your life entirely. If she wants to live here with you, she can't afford to dislike the woman you want to marry. So if you're in love with this Joan person, go ahead and ask her to be your wife. Under her you'll be able to employ all the domestic staff you require, because obviously there'll be no incentive for the husband-chasers and your suspicions will also, I trust, be removed."

"I think you're joking," he said dubiously. "I don't think—in fact I know darned well—I'm not in love with

Joan, and I'm sure she regards me as platonically. However, there's that wretched child out somewhere alone between here and—"

"I'm here, Uncle Rob," came a small voice from the conservatory. "Are you very mad?"

"Come here, you brat!" he roared furiously, so that even Diana jumped, not realising he was expressing his relief at the girl's safe arrival. "If you're brave enough to cock a snook at your schoolmarm's you'll be brave enough to come out and give an account of yourself, I trust. Where are you? Jump to it!"

Far from jumping to it, however, a navy-blue-coated figure detached itself from the potted palms and trailed miserably into the kitchen, pulling a black beaver hat from a rain of pale gold hair as she did so. An anxious young face looked up into the scowling countenance of Robert Taunton.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Rob. Frankly, I couldn't stick another day of that place. You *must* understand. It was *ghastly*!"

"Liz, I—" he looked helpless, then hugged the girl to him with a little *te deum* of thankfulness.

"I was seriously considering committing suicide," the child announced, more happily.

Diana snorted and proceeded to fill a kettle which she placed on the stove.

"Who's that?" Liz asked politely. "Our new you-know-what?"

"We haven't got a you-know-what," Robert Taunton said. "This is Miss Wills and she's a doctor."

"How do you do!" Diana nodded.

"I want to be a doctor," Liz decided. "I shall be one eventually, I suppose."

"If you're going to be a doctor, Liz," Diana proceeded, putting her hands on the girl's shoulders, "you're going to have to toe the line in some respects. You're also going to have to start thinking of your uncle a little more often. You write letters which are intended to make him miserable, and that's not fair, because you and I both know how clever we females are at playing on a man's weaknesses." Liz's eyes fell at this. She understood perfectly. "So your poor uncle has been working hard—and I know exactly how hard he works!—with all this misery on his mind. If things had gone on much longer it might have been he who wanted to put an end to things, and then who would have been most sorry?"

Liz sniffed miserably.

"Well now," Diana said more cheerfully, taking a rubber bottle off the wall and filling it from the singing kettle, "things didn't get as bad as that, so there's your future to be discussed, in the morning. Now I think young ladies who have run away from school should go to bed and cuddle this, don't you?"

"Will you come up with me, please?" Liz begged.

Diana looked towards Robert Taunton.

"Do go ahead," he said dazedly. "I'd better phone St. Mary's."

When she came downstairs again, having tucked the runaway into her own bed and heard her prayers, she saw that it was past eleven and therefore after the time of her announced return to St. John's.

"I have a day off tomorrow, sir," she said as she scrambled into her coat, "so don't hesitate to let me know if I can help in any way. I must go now, however."

"Thank you. Yes—er—wait a minute. Liz likes you. She listened to you."

"Oh!" Diana laughed. "I should think I've mortally offended that young lady for life."

"No, she was really heeding you. It's odd. She just sticks her head in the air and, without uttering a word, manages to be very rude to Joan."

"I must go now, sir," Diana said urgently.

"Of course you must. It's late. Thanks most awfully. We didn't get the chance to talk about your troubles, did we?"

Out in the open air, seeking the keys from her now magically highly polished small car, Diana realised she had been so involved in another's affairs for a few hours that she had forgotten she had troubles peculiarly her own.

Diana had subconsciously been dreading her day off duty, realising that a mind and hands fully occupied are the best anodyne for a pain only as yet anticipated. Surely the full force of Nigel's defection had not yet struck her, or it would all seem so much more terrible?

She took breakfast in her room—a luxury afforded the staff on their off-days—and then she used the corridor phone to ring up Devon Place.

"Is that you, Mr. Taunton?" she asked, just as the deputy matron, Miss Cotton, was passing. "Can I do anything to help you or are you fixed up?"

"Thank you," Robert Taunton's voice came metallically, "but I think we

can manage, Miss Wills. Mrs. Dawkes' the mother of the lad who keeps my car bright and shining, is coming in for a week until Elizabeth's future is settled. I've heard that St. Hilda's, at Little Phelpham, takes weekly boarders. Liz says she wouldn't mind that, so we're going to see the Head this afternoon. By the way, if you haven't anything planned for today, I'm doing a rather interesting job at my clinic this morning at eleven. You haven't seen my clinic, have you? If you come along we can follow the business up with lunch—out, of course—and then take Liz on to Little Phelpham."

Diana hesitated, wondering at the consultant's sudden predelection for her company. She didn't want anybody's pity; frankly there was nothing really pitiful about her predicament.

"Of course if you'd rather not . . . ?" his voice came again, rather curtly.

"I'd love to see the clinic, sir, she suddenly enthused. If she was to get on in her profession obviously she couldn't afford to offend her teachers. "And I think St. Hilda's is a very good bet for Liz. She'll be able to come home at weekends without tying you too much."

"Very well, Miss Wills. I'll see you at eleven."

At half-past ten she was finishing a letter to her parent, advising him of the ending of her engagement, when the door opened behind her and Nigel entered the room, a Nigel obviously fortified by a stiff glass or two of whisky. He stood with his back to the door and she started up, her heart beating furiously.

"How—how are you, Nigel?" she heard her voice ask, betraying no other emotion.

"What the—the hell do you care?" he asked savagely. "I'm just an—an old glove as far as you're concerned!"

She sealed and stamped her letter as calmly as possible.

"Please let me pass, Nigel," she then requested. "You know you shouldn't be in my room."

"You bet I shouldn't!" his eyes blazed. "You might be in the cart if I were discovered, Miss Goody-goody Wills!"

She didn't like him in this mood or this present situation one bit. Nigel always had been easily aggrieved under the influence of alcohol.

"It's my day off," she announced, "and I'm going out. I have an appointment at eleven. We can talk some other time, Nigel, when—when you're better."

"I am better," he told her. "I've been discharged as fit to proceed on my holiday or—" he looked suggestively at her—"my honeymoon. I—I thought we might bring things forward, Di, and go off together."

She was startled and stood rigid.

"You thought *what*?" she asked indignantly.

"You weren't yourself the other evening," he reasoned with her, "or you wouldn't have behaved like the Woman Scorned. Well, you've had time to think, as I have, and there's no harm done which can't be mended. Now say you forgive me. Kiss and make up."

He took a step towards her, his hands some face full of pleading, but her pallor only increased as she retreated from him.

"Don't touch me," she warned him, "or I'll scream. It's all over, Nigel, and you'd better take your leave as planned."

His lips curled as he considered her words.

"So you'll scream, will you?" he demanded. "And how will you explain my presence here? I've already let it drop to Wighting, the porter, that I was coming here at your invitation."

"I'll simply deny it," she said hotly, "and my word's as good as yours any day. Now let me pass, please! I'm late already."

"Meeting dear Robbie?" he suddenly taunted. "My, but how quickly you've rebounded, haven't you? You and your faithful heart! I suppose you were carrying on with him on the quiet all the time, but it was I who was found out. Why, you little deceiver, you!"

He seized her suddenly as in a vice, pinioned her arms and struggled to capture her lips with his own. She fought like a mad thing, using her feet when she could, but Nigel merely laughed and as they struggled there was a sudden crash and the fumes of spirits filled the air.

Diana looked in horror at the whisky bottle lying in splinters on the floor, at the two glasses standing side by side on the small bedside table, which Nigel must have placed there when he came in, and then at the opening door which revealed the shocked countenance of Matron and a retinue of medical staff in attendance.

Miss Rambler looked first at the couple in the room, sniffed rather obviously, then regarded the broken bottle and the two glasses.

"Well?" she then asked coldly. "What

is the meaning of all this commotion, Doctors?"

"C-commotion, Matron?" Diana asked breathlessly.

"I said commotion, Miss Wills, and I meant commotion. The X-ray Department is only next door and the disturbance you were creating was annoyingly obvious therein. I'm still waiting."

Nigel said ringingly, "Oh, come, Matron, you were young yourself once. Rules are made to be relaxed. My fiancée asked me over for a goodbye drink, and if we hadn't dropped the bottle you'd never have known."

Matron's eyes became bright beads of indignation.

"Doctor Lester, it seems to me that rules are not only relaxed but consistently ignored by you when it suits your purpose. Doctor Wills had no right to invite you into her private room unless she is prepared to take the consequences of her actions. As it is I intend to report you both to the Hospital Disciplinary Committee, and they will act as they see fit. You will now leave this room, Doctor Lester."

Nigel grinned at Diana over Matron's shoulder as though saying, "Talk yourself out of *that*, my girl," and she felt utterly sick at heart, suddenly.

When mud was thrown some of it always stuck. She could tell the simple truth, how it was Nigel who had accosted her, and even though an official reprimand was the only outcome there would always be somebody who doubted the wisdom of keeping her on at St. John's.

If the committee took the least charitable view she might even be sacked, and then what price her career?

"Oh, damn Nigel!" she said from the heart as she went off to keep her appointment with Robert Taunton.

It was fifteen minutes' drive to the clinic and she arrived at twelve-fifteen, only to be told the operation she had come to see was over.

"I was unavoidably delayed, sir," she told the scowling principal as he scrubbed up in the elegantly appointed wash-room attached to the equally elegantly appointed small theatre. "I'm terribly sorry."

"Your loss, Miss Wills," he said off-handedly. "No need to apologise."

"Oh, don't be an old bear, Robert!" said a third voice, familiarly, and for the first time Diana saw Joan Hayling, the youthful, very good-looking matron of the clinic. "You can't expect everyone



"Well? What is the meaning of all this commotion, Doctors?"

to take the same interest in your lame ducks as you do."

Diana, looking at Matron, was also quickly assailed by a pair of hazel eyes framed by a complexion of rose pink, of the type that goes with naturally fair hair.

Joan Hayling was tall; she scarcely raised her eyes to regard the consultant, and she looked down quite five inches when she eyed Doctor Di.

"We must introduce ourselves, Doctor Wills," she announced, offering a cool white hand. "I'm Joan Hayling." They shook hands. "He's really impossible at times," she went on with smiling candour, as though a third party was not present, "just like a bear with a sore head. I don't let him upset me any more."

"Now stop demoralising Miss Wills, Joan," Robert Taunton said coldly. "She knows as well as I do the importance of punctuality in this business. That's if she's as eager to learn as I thought she was."

"Oh, I am, sir!" Diana gasped.

"You haven't given the poor dear a chance to explain what kept her," Matron said blandly. "Obviously something more important came up. . . ."

"Not *more* important," Diana corrected, with a flush.

"Here!" Joan Hayling smiled chidingly, "I'm trying to defend you, Doctor Wills. That's not exactly helping matters, is it?"

"Well? What kept you?" Robert Taunton asked obligingly.

Diana flushed to her hair roots.

"It was a private matter, sir."

"Oh, very well. There's nothing more to be said, is there? I accept your apology and won't keep you any longer, Doctor Wills. Good morning!"

Diana realised that she was being dismissed from the presence. Luncheon and the drive out to St. Hilda's were automatically to be forfeited owing to her apparent professional defection.

"What a savage you are, Robert!" Joan Hayling derided in her carefully modulated voice. "That poor girl was almost in tears. I think she's a very nice girl, the sort that would make you a good wife!"

She had thought he would laugh at the absurdity of such an observation. Instead, however, he regarded her to say, "For once you and Liz are in accord, old thing. She thinks I ought to snap up the delectable Miss Wills as well."

"She does?" Matron asked quickly. "How is it Liz has met this—er—young woman?"

"She came to dinner last night. Cooked

it, as a matter of fact. She was there when Liz came home with her tail between her legs."

"I see," said Matron, who didn't see at all and was inwardly fuming about it. "Well, I take it you're not such a confirmed bachelor after all now that Liz has given you her blessing to go ahead?"

"You know, Joan," he said coolly, knotting his tie and reaching his arms into the jacket she was holding for him, "I don't think any man in his right mind is ever a 'confirmed' bachelor. Such a person has simply lacked the right opportunities, as I have. Whenever I see a woman bringing to order the chaos of my establishment, I'm sorely tempted to speak. But women insist on involving the emotions. They're not content with amicable domestic arrangements. They want to be loved—cherished. . . ."

Matron became dewy-eyed in a moment.

"Whatever such a woman desired as her ideal, Robert, she might well be content with a real proposition. You should try it and see."

"I should hate to be turned down," he decided. "My pride wouldn't stand it."

"Why should any woman turn you down?" Matron asked reassuringly. "You're very attractive and—and presentable, you know, Robert. May I come and cook your dinner this evening?"

He turned to regard her, and she dimpled and said, "Otherwise I shall be jealous, and then I'll be less efficient at my job. Seriously, though, I would like to say hello to Liz. I know she isn't enthusiastic about me, but that's because she knows I—it doesn't matter," she finished lamely.

"Do come, if you've nothing better on," he invited, squeezing her shoulder chummily. "I must go now, and I'll come back for a final look round about five-thirty. See you then!"

It was a Friday and it was the thirteenth, which fact Diana had cause to remember before the day was out.

The morning was given over to Mr. Taunton's theatre, at which she was always required to assist, and there had been a formal letter handed her at breakfast, requesting her presence before the hospital disciplinary committee, meeting in Matron's office at two-ten p.m. promptly.

It seemed there was no justice in the world, and to make matters worse Mr. Taunton was in a very bad mood.

The theatre staff were all gloomily affected by the time Diana appeared on the scene. Mr. Taunton had been in already, Theatre Sister announced tersely, looked at the list, found fault with everything and everybody, complained at her (Miss Wills') non-appearance and gone off for coffee.

"I'm in good time," Diana said indignantly, looking at the theatre clock, which registered ten minutes to nine o'clock.

"He says he wanted to start at eight-thirty, Doctor, and sent you a message to that effect."

"Well, he didn't!" Diana snapped, and added, "Or else I didn't get it." She deliberately softened her tone, suddenly realising the fellowship which must exist between consultant and assistant, at least on the surface. Discipline demanded the complete acquiescence of the subordinate party; the new probationer must defer to the second-year nurse, the nurse to the staff nurse, Staff to Sister and so on up the scale. If the consultant said he had notified his assistant of a change of plan, then so he had, or so everybody else must be allowed to think.

"But he jolly well didn't!" Diana told herself rebelliously as she scrubbed up and was draped in a sterile gown by the attendant Theatre Staff Nurse. "My name isn't Muggins for any other man after the way Nigel has behaved!"

Robert Taunton cut her dead when he finally decided to arrive in a dreadful bustle, setting the wheels of the morning's events into motion at such a rate that he had the Theatre Junior in tears in no time.

"Get rid of that girl!" he roared to Sister. "Put her where she belongs, among the babies!"

"Oh, sir," said Sister coldly, "I don't think there's any need for that. Nurse is sterile and it would take up time getting a replacement. Your first patient is waiting, sir."

"Aren't we all?" he then flashed, ominously. "I seem to have been waiting for ages."

"Then let's begin—sir," Diana suggested, having to lower her eyes to hide the angry glint in them.

"Oh, Miss Wills, you're here!" he said in a sudden deceptive, avuncular tone. "You *did* manage to stagger out of your bed by nine, then? Good! Bring her in!" he called ringing, while Diana swallowed and tried not to

believe she could very easily become apoplectic if she saw much more of this man in this mood.

The morning sped by at a terrific rate.

"Come and try your hand here," he suddenly invited off-handedly as the last patient was wheeled in.

"Sir?" Diana questioned in surprise.

On the table lay a small boy with an ugly tuck of a new scar clearly visible under his chubby chin.

"Impaled himself on a railing," Robert Taunton explained, "and the local G.P. stitched him up. Very tightly," he added, "as a means to reducing the risk of infection. But the kiddy should have been hospitalized for a bit to give him the chance to do the job properly. He was simply cobbled up in a hurry, and now his mama doesn't like it. I want you to cut down the line of the old scar and put in seven silk stitches instead of four, as previously. Come on! You can do it."

Diana felt terribly nervous, but knew better than to argue. She had already been entrusted to remove a selection of appendices and had once cut down to a stomach for Mr. Argyle, before he took over. But this was different; whatever she did here would show . . .

"Decide, and then don't dither," Robert Taunton advised from her shoulder. "Knife, Sister!"

Sister Cirrus gave a decided sniff as she slipped the knife into what she considered were alien hands.

"Don't enlarge on it, just follow it," Diana was again advised as she cut surely and shallowly into human tissue.

She felt a sudden exultation as she called for haemostats and controlled the bleeding. The puckered skin had mercifully unwrinkled as it was released, and in no time at all she was stitching, without overlapping, so that the two edges would grow together rather than granulate lumpily.

"Jolly good!" her tutor said, good-tempered for the first time that day. "I think he'll be a pretty boy again now! And all thanks to you!"

"To you, sir!" Diana dimpled.

"Got to go," he said, in a sudden bustle. "Scarcely time for a bite of lunch. Have to be at Matron's office by two to sit on a wretched committee! You'd think fully fledged doctors knew how to comport themselves, wouldn't you?"

Diana was left staring after him, all her glory of achievement now fled.

So *he* was on the disciplinary committee, was he? He would hear the whole rotten story and sit in judgment on her with something to really bite on this time.

Unless Nigel played the gentleman by telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth . . . ?

Diana might have worried more if she could have heard Nigel telling the "truth", but he was required to present himself promptly at two, whereas she was to be interviewed at ten past.

Nigel strolled into Matron's office looking young, handsome and extremely apologetic.

"Good afternoon, Matron, sirs . . ." he vouchsafed. "I'm awfully sorry you're here on my account."

"Sit down, young man," said the chairman of the hospital committee tersely. "Please confine yourself to answering questions."

Besides the "Old Codger", as Mr. Archibald Fairchild was colloquially known, there was the Senior Medical Officer, who was also Nigel's immediate superior, Matron, and Robert Taunton; the latter frowning heavily down at his note-pad.

"Now," said the chairman. "This is a bad business, young man. You know you're not supposed to visit a young woman in her private quarters or be so visited. There are residents' sitting-rooms for that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing, sir?" asked Nigel deferentially.

"Well—meeting one another, of course," the chairman said guardedly.

"Even amorous enterprises are not frowned upon outside the hospital precincts, Doctor," Robert Taunton said sharply. "You seem to be making a habit of assignations detrimental to the reputations of the ladies concerned."

This was calling a spade a spade with a vengeance, and Nigel didn't like it. He flushed dully.

"One is sometimes the victim of circumstances, sir," he pointed out.

"You mean Doctor Wills hauled you into her room against your will?" smiled Doctor O'Glynn, prepared to enjoy this particular session if at all possible.

"Why, no, sir. May I know what Doctor Wills has told you, sir?"

"We haven't seen her yet," said Matron severely.

"Oh, well—" Nigel grimaced suddenly—"she may try to shield me, but the truth is I went to see her. We were saying goodbye, you see, as I'm due to leave. My fiancée was—er—a little upset."

"Surely she's your ex-fiancée?" demanded Robert Taunton.

"Well, what difference—?"

"All the difference in the world to your welcome, I should think," the hated creature went on relentlessly. "The ensuing scuffle heard in X-ray was either Doctor Wills exuberantly welcoming your attentions or as exuberantly trying to throw you out. Which was it?"

Nigel's face blazed with mortification. He had come here determined to put the facts before the committee in such a way as to leave no one in doubt but that the fracas in Diana's room was accountable six to one and half a dozen to the other. In patently assuming all obvious guilt he would as determinedly rob Diana of her innocence. But now this fellow Taunton was playing telling little innuendoes where they hurt most.

From defending he rushed rashly into attack.

"I didn't break Doctor Wills' door down to get in," he said nastily.

"I don't suppose her door *would* be locked at that time of morning," Robert Taunton said equably. "Anybody turning the handle could get in."

"You seem to know, sir!" Nigel checked the consultant.

"Of course I know. I called there the other morning to ask Doctor Wills to assist me. Had I been so inclined I suppose I could have been standing where you are now."

"The point is," Matron interrupted sharply, "was Doctor Lester there on invitation or not?"

Four pair of eyes questioned Nigel on this point.

He tossed his head impatiently. "I always felt free to visit my fiancée if I wished," he said.

"You mean you've been in her room before?" asked the S.M.O.

"Well . . ." Nigel obviously hesitated.

"Only Wednesday's business is relevant," said the chairman uneasily.

"Doctor Lester seems to be remarkably tongue-tied at the wrong moments," Robert Taunton decided.

"Having

left us to believe Doctor Wills is a semi-scarlet woman who welcomes men friends into her private room at all times, he is now smitten by silence. I suggest we ask Doctor Lester to wait in the corridor and have a word with the lady in the case."

Diana entered looking nervous but with eyes steady. She had nothing to be ashamed of, no matter what anybody else thought.

"Just three questions, Doctor Wills," said the chairman, who had always had a soft spot for this girl since she assisted at an operation on his wife. "You're not on oath, you know, but naturally we would like the truth."

"You shall have it, sir," promised Diana, without hesitation.

"Did you invite Doctor Lester to your room on Wednesday last?"

"No, sir."

"Good! That agrees with what he has told us."

Nigel has told the truth! Diana inwardly rejoiced. He hasn't revenged himself on me after all!

"Though we are told this is irrelevant," Matron proceeded stiffly, "may I know if you have ever entertained Doctor Lester in your room, Doctor Wills?"

"No. No, I haven't," Diana said frankly, and looked round thinking she might well be on a quiz show asking: "The third question, please?"

"When Doctor Lester did call upon you, however, you drank with him, etcetera?" enquired the S.M.O., doodling with a ball-point pen on the pad in front of him.

"I don't know what you mean by the 'etcetera', sir," Diana said spiritedly, "but I certainly didn't drink with Doctor Lester."

"There were two glasses!" Matron snapped.

"I saw them at the same moment you did, Matron," Diana agreed.

"Yet you insist you didn't take a drink?"

"I don't need to insist, I hope. I've already denied it adequately."

"Matron, gentlemen," Robert Taunton said mildly, "may I speak? This unfortunate business prevented Doctor Wills from keeping an appointment that day at my clinic. When she did arrive she was obviously distract but she *had not been drinking*. I'm particularly sensitive to the smell of alcohol about my assistants."

There was a telling pause while they

all considered the facts and hummed and ha'd a little.

"Now that you have been gracious enough to hear me," Diana said in a ringing voice, "I would like to save you further embarrassment by tendering my resignation. You shall have it in writing by tomorrow."

There was a shocked silence broken by Robert Taunton who said, most unmildly, "You silly little fool! You can't let a stupid carpeting like this interfere with a most promising career! You'd better take the day off, or something, and come to your senses!"

Before she was excused Diana heard Mr. Fairchild say, "Don't do anything rash, my dear. There was never any question of dismissing you."

"Of course not," Matron backed him up, "but we must have discipline. If everyone resigned who appeared before this committee we'd have no staff left."

"I was up five times at my training hospital," the R.M.O. boasted.

Diana eventually found herself alone and still decided, "I've got to leave St. John's. I don't think I'll ever be happy here again."

The fateful letter of resignation was written and delivered.

Next day a letter found its way into her pigeon-hole which she read with some misgivings.

"My dear Miss Wills,

"If you must emulate the mule will you at least come along to Devon Place for Sunday luncheon so that your future may be intelligently discussed? As you have been actively assisting me at my operations for some time I naturally assume a professional interest in your activities and have thought highly of you as a pupil, which was apparent, I consider, in the gesture I made at our last meeting in Theatre.

"I hope you will not allow false pride to isolate you from those who only wish you well.

"Sincerely,

"ROBERT ST. J. TAUNTON."

"But why?" Robert Taunton demanded after an adequate, homely lunch prepared and cooked by Mrs. Duwkes, who was by all accounts proving herself a treasure in the consultant's household. "Why, when the situation was so obviously well in hand, and the committee entirely in your

favour, did you toss in your resignation like that? Even Lester hasn't been shamed into resigning. He got off with a ten-pound fine, and very lightly, too."

"That's why, for one thing," Diana mused. "I'm not happy discussing my affairs with other people——" she looked uncertainly at the man across the fireplace, who was balancing an exquisite Crown Derby coffee cup on his knee—"but Nigel has made so much of our affair horribly public. I couldn't continue to work in the same hospital with him after that."

"So he has the satisfaction of driving you out?"

"If he looks on it as satisfaction, yes. Actually——" she bit her lip in sheer embarrassment.

"You can tell me," he encouraged softly, "if it helps."

"It does seem to, sir. I was going to say that my denial of Nigel appears to have had the effect of sending my stock sky-high with him. He came to see me, that morning, with a view to our patching things up. I think perhaps I should have been flattered, but actually I was horrified. I—I almost hated Nigel for suggesting such a thing. When he realised how I felt, he—he—Well, you know what actually happened, but the awful thing to me was that I felt that Nigel would stop at nothing to get me back. I suppose in a way I'm rather afraid of him, wondering what he'll try next. Therefore I've decided to go away and not inform him of my whereabouts. As he is entirely dependent on his job he won't be able to give it up to come and look for me."

Robert Taunton finished his coffee and put down the empty cup on the small table beside him.

"Of course you have an alternative course of action, Miss Wills," he suggested. "You could marry someone else."

"Oh, yes," she smiled, thinking he was joking, "husbands grow on trees."

He frowned almost severely, as though privately disapproving of this subject. "I suppose you have the normal woman's desire for marriage?" he asked. "I mean you expect to marry one day, have children, all that?"

She frowned also with concentration.

"No," she shook her head, "I don't expect it. I was prepared to give up my job to be Nigel's wife, but events have proved the mistake that would

have been! I now think that when a woman is as deeply involved in a career as I am, to sacrifice it for anything other than a physical disability is a grave error. Work such as ours is a part of us. It's not like washing up, which is simply a chore. Am—am I making myself clear, sir?"

"Very clear," he approved her. "Men marry and keep the dignity of their labours about them. Women, on the other hand, so often exchange the dignity of a career for the domestic frustration they inherit in marriage. While the honeymoon lasts it all seems novel and intriguing, but the sighs and pinings begin with the first post-marital tiff."

"Then you think all wives should be allowed to work, sir?"

"If they want to. Some women need to weave their homes about them, as a bird weaves its nest. But all wives aren't nesting birds. The majority of 'em are Pandoras, opening the forbidden box of knowledge a little wider each day and getting stung for their pains. They're the ones who have become the symbol of the last two decades since the war: they're the psychiatrist's private army; the great sisterhood of frustrated females.

"I can think of nothing more pleasant on a wet Sunday afternoon, Miss Wills, than a crackling log fire and a smiling woman in the opposite chair." He shook the vision away sharply. "Which brings me to my point, and I would be obliged if you would hear me out until I've quite finished speaking. At a certain point you may wish to register protest, but I want you to realise from the outset that I have a very real interest in—and sympathy with—your career, and nothing I am about to say is irrelevant to *that*, though you may think otherwise until you have heard all. Now, are you relaxed? Are you listening?"

Diana was listening, but found it difficult to relax; she was reminded of the broadcast for small children where elegant female voices asked: "Are you comfortable? Then I'll begin . . ."

"Go on, sir," she found herself urging expectantly. Half an hour later she was quite faint from shock, and had to be restored with brandy!

"I'm thirty-seven," Robert Taunton began, "though I know I look older. I wear this moustache to make me look older so that Liz will respect me for my years, if nothing else. I have an

adequate private income and a good job. I don't suppose I shall ever starve even if the bottom falls out of the stock market. I have a niece, Elizabeth Jane Hartfell, problem child, in the process of growing up inadequately educated. I run a private clinic which pays for itself and occasionally shows a small profit, financially speaking, but it gives me tremendous satisfaction in other ways and provides a dozen females, two student doctors and various domestics with an adequate living. One of my housemen is leaving the clinic; he prefers working in London; so there is a job going at the moment . . ."

At last Diana thought she knew what was to be the outcome of this soliloquy; she was going to be offered a job at the Taunton clinic. ". . . But this is purely incidental to the main proposition I had in mind for you," he went on, while her mind became a blank again and she was sure an illuminated question mark must be visibly growing out of the top of her head, as though she had become a figure in a cartoon.

"I was careful to ascertain, Miss Wills, before I spoke of these things, that you've eschewed all plans of an emotional nature for the foreseeable future, as I have. I take my guardianship of my dead sister's surviving child perhaps too seriously for my own comfort, but you know, the reason for that. I'm perhaps a difficult fellow to work with; I imagine many of my assistants are fools and I don't hesitate to tell them so. Inadequacy offends me. Outside of work, however, I think I'm easy enough to get along with—"

"What about all the housekeepers you've driven away, sir?" Diana couldn't resist enquiring.

"Well now, it's funny you should ask that. Mrs. Dawkes thinks I'm a lamb, and as she's a 'widder woman' and having trouble with her landlord over a leaking roof, I've asked her to move in here with young Tom, who works at the local garage and for me in his spare time. There's a service flat in the garden which merely needs renovating. Also, when I rang the agency about a maid, they were amused when I called myself 'that difficult Taunton fellow'. 'You're not difficult, Mr. Taunton, one sweet thing assured me, 'it was the lady who rang on your behalf. There was no satisfying *her*.' I can't understand it. They must have

misunderstood Joan, because she's one of the sweetest people in the world."

Diana looked slightly askance. "But you've made me digress," he said severely. "What was I saying?"

"You were assuring me how easy you were to get along with outside of working hours, sir," she smiled ruefully, "though I can't see what all this has to do with—"

"It has everything to do with you, Miss Wills," he cut her short, "if you'll continue to listen instead of interrupting. You see, I've been putting you in the picture with a view to asking you to be my wife. This would be a purely business arrangement; you have my oath on that; but as propitious for you at the present time, I hope, as for me. You see, I need a woman in this house who is not a domestic worker, but one whom Liz could confide in and trust and respect. She has already decided you fill the bill in this respect. I also need a settled domestic scene for Liz if she's to come home to this house at weekends and perhaps inflict her friends on me. You, on your part, need a job, Miss Wills, and the vacancy, as I've explained, will soon be ready and waiting."

"Miss Wills! Doctor Wills . . . say something, for God's sake!"

"I—I can't," Diana muttered weakly, which is why the brandy was forthcoming and why a red-faced Robert Taunton was caught in the act of persuading the reviving liquid between the pallid lips of the young lady who had come to luncheon, by a very interested and heaving Mrs. Dawkes.

The dead bracken crunched under their feet, and up here on the moors the air was keen and fresh.

"You walk well," Robert Taunton told his companion, his dark eyes glowing with physical well-being. "We must have done all of seven miles."

Diana laughed.

"My stomach feels like it," she decided. "I'm as hungry as a hunter."

"Here!" he urged her, tugging her by the arm towards him. "You see that red roof in the valley? That's the old inn where we eat gammon and eggs. Only about half a mile as the crow flies, but we're not flying. Give me your hand. The path's steep and slippery at this time of year."

She wouldn't have admitted it for the world, but she liked holding hands

with Robert Taunton, feeling the tight squeeze keeping her in check when her feet found a patch of moist ice and shot away.

All this was part of the policy of getting to know one another and introduce their conspiracy to a watching world. For three weeks, now, they had dined and wined together, spent free time roaming the moors, as now, or motoring, attending concerts and theatres and generally going through the outward motions of courtship at least.

Sometimes Diana felt almost happy about their "arrangement", especially when Robert Taunton opened his library door and indicated the large roll-top desk where two could sit and talk and study without fear of interruption, for the Taunton library was taboo to all domestics, and looked it.

"You'll trust me to dust and clean, I hope, sir?" Diana asked on one occasion, critically.

"Listen to me, my girl," Robert Taunton said, not unkindly, "you must drop this 'sir' business, you know, and address me as Robert."

"Oh, I couldn't, sir!" she denied hastily, colouring in confusion, for which she hated herself.

He smiled with infinite patience, loth to rush her.

"It'll come," he told her. "Robert's not such a difficult name to manage. My familiars call me Rob."

"I—I must try to remember, Robert," she said guardedly, not putting herself among his "familiars" by using the diminutive. "And you must call me Diana, of course," she added, her eyes on the carpet so that he particularly noticed the length of the black, veiling lashes.

"Diana's a very nice name," he said thoughtfully. "How does the poem go, now . . . ?" "Queen and huntress, chaste and fair . . . That's it! 'Chaste and fair . . .' " he smiled with his eyes. "I suppose it could apply?"

"I'm not the huntress type, Robert," she said levelly, "and I don't think our proposed relationship requires poetry to keep it going."

"Touche!" he agreed, and smiled again.

These thoughts were going through her mind as she slipped and slithered behind him down the moorland path leading to the grey ribbon of road beneath. Now she addressed him as

Robert without demur, and he, too, used her Christian name or called her "my dear" with a naturalness which left him uncommitted.

"I had trouble with Liz today," he confided as they reached the road and strode out independently of one another for the inn. "She was all for throwing a tantrum and not going off to school. It appears she had the role of glamorous bridesmaid all planned for herself, and when I told her we would be getting married at the registrar's at eight o'clock one morning, she nearly had a fit."

Diana became thoughtful, thinking of young Elizabeth and picturing her disappointment.

"I—I suppose we couldn't . . . ?" she said tentatively.

"Of course not!" he told her sharply. "The atmosphere of a church is very different. One is required to make serious promises, serious enough to be called vows . . ."

"We answer similar questions before a registrar," Diana said spiritedly.

"That may be," he granted, "but they aren't nearly so specific—and I prefer not to ask God to be my witness, if you don't mind."

It seemed to Diana that a sudden chill had descended over the expedition, a chill not wholly climatic.

"Look here, Robert," she said impulsively, "if you want to cry off it's all right, you know."

He laughed uneasily.

"Who's talking about crying off?" he demanded. "Nothing's changed. Would you like to cry off?"

She looked uncertain.

"Frankly, I don't know. I gained the impression a moment ago that you're

ashamed of what we're proposing to do."

"Ashamed? Rubbish!" he assured her. "I simply want to conform to the legal side for your sake as much as mine. Churches are family institutions: the theme running throughout the marriage ceremony is of children coming of the union. You must know that, Diana. You and I would be cheating to use the church for the sake of Elizabeth's absurd vanity."

"I do see," she agreed. "I hadn't really thought about it."

"Well, do think about everything very seriously for the next twenty-four hours, my dear. After that there must be no turning back. The announcement will be published in the paper, there'll be a sort of honeymoon to arrange, and—"

"Honeymoon?" she echoed, startled.

"Now don't panic," he told her gently. "We'll simply go away and find some sunshine and discuss the future at leisure. I'm afraid our public will expect the 'honeymoon', Diana. They would talk if we simply turned up for work next day as though nothing had happened, wouldn't they?"

"I suppose so. They're not to know that nothing *will* have happened."

He looked at her, suspecting her of speaking with her tongue in her cheek, but she had spotted the inn now, and was lengthening her stride in anticipation of a tasty meal.

Dash it! she was a nice girl, a pretty girl, and he liked her.

Well, he supposed, that was a safe enough start to a marriage, and precluded the eventuality of early boredom setting in. Providing he could keep the girl interested and on her toes it might well be a lot of good would come of the venture . . . Theirs was to wait and see.

CHAPTER THREE

THE morning sun slanted in at the window and lay warmly across the bed, touching the bare arm of the young woman who slept therein, and lying like a caress on a cheek already flushed with slumber.

The door to the bedroom opened softly and a dark-complexioned beauty stood revealed, gazing timidly within

before knocking and greeting, "*Buenos días, señora! Hace un dia hermoso?*"

Diana opened one eye and thought for a moment she must be waking up in heaven.

Then it all came back.

She opened both eyes and sat up in bed.

"*Buenos días, Rosita,*" she replied

smilingly, and added, "I do not speak Spanish."

"Sorry, *senora*," the other giggled happily. "I speak leetle Englis! Is nice day," she added, and set a tray of coffee, rolls and fruit on the bedside table. "Señor Taunton ees well?"

The girl giggled again and made her escape, obviously not expecting an answer. In Majorca if a husband was not feeling well after his wedding night he never would feel well. It was as simple as yesterday.

The moment of panic had faded as something warm and comforting slid over her shoulders; something fragrant and exotic. Her seeking fingers disappeared in the softness of blue mink and she sought Robert Taunton's reassuring eyes.

"Your wedding present, Diana," he told her, "from me. I wasn't going to give it to you until we got back, but this seemed the right day to christen it. I hope you like it."

"Like it?" she gasped, seeing herself reflected in a nearby window. "Oh, Robert, you shouldn't have—! I haven't got anything for you."

Until that moment she hadn't realised that being Robert Taunton's wife might mean she would have more money to spend on clothes. She had innocently thought of herself as still existing on the salary she would earn as his assistant at the clinic, but of course he would expect her to look the part of Mrs. Taunton, at least.

Her father had declined to come and see her married at the register office. Robert had been to see him and had the parental blessing, but there was too much Doctor Wills, senior, did not understand regarding his daughter's apparent change of both heart and sweetheart that he preferred to keep his distance until she should decide to take him into her confidence. For her part, Diana knew her father was too shrewd to be content with anything less than the truth, and so she had avoided him in person, though there had been several lengthy harangues on the telephone between them.

"I suppose you know what you're doing, girl," Doctor Wills had stated, "and I like Taunton. I couldn't stick that other fellow you were going around with. But if you're going to be happy . . . ?"

"I am, Father. Robert's good and kind."

"Those aren't the qualities women usually marry for. Are you—?"

"Father, I have to go now. The pips have gone twice and I haven't any more change. Take care of yourself!"

After the cold little ceremony at the register office, witnessed by two doctors Diana associated with legend, there had been an equally embarrassing little reception at a very high-class hotel, where sundry personnel of Farlingham's medical society had congregated for drinks and good wishes.

The short mink jacket helped enormously with her poise, however, and she noticed Joan Hayling eyeing it covetously at one time.

"You'll make him happy, won't you?" Joan asked, just before they left to catch their train.

"I'll do all in my power," Diana assured the other.

"Robert deserves happiness after all this time," Joan went on relentlessly, and Diana knew that at least one person considered that Robert Taunton had thrown away his chances of true happiness yet again.

"I wish I was going with you, Di," Liz had said familiarly, "but I know that's impossible. And don't forget to be back in time. I've agreed to spend two weekends at school and then I'll be ready for a break. Look after him, won't you, Di?"

"Aren't you going to ask your Uncle Rob to look after *me*?"

"If you like. But I don't think that will be necessary."

In the reserved first-class compartment taking them south in the express, constraint had fallen over the newly-weds like a mantle. Diana had been glad when a somewhat forced conversation had languished and Robert had fallen asleep. It was easy to study him now, that man in repose, this man the world would henceforward think of as her husband. He had a good crop of well-cut, smooth hair; heavy brows and all the arrogance that goes with an aquiline nose. The mouth was softer in sleep than when he strode around a theatre or ward issuing orders and handing out reprimands. In some ways it was a craggy face and utterly masculine and yet she knew he could be as tender-hearted as any woman where Liz was concerned.

For a moment she resented Liz being the sole recipient of this tenderness, then she saw the eyes had flickered

open and were regarding her askance, smiling.

"Did I snore?" he asked, as she felt the colour rush into her cheeks at being caught staring.

"N-no, Robert," she assured him. "You had a nice sleep," she added, fussing unnecessarily in her new navy handbag.

"Diana," he leaned forward to say, sincerely, "I'm glad it's over, that we—we've taken this step. I want you to know that I'll do my utmost to see you don't regret it. You understand?"

He sought her hand, squeezed it gently and then impulsively put his lips to her fingers.

"A purely continental gesture," he assured her, "and not out of line, I hope? I've wanted to say all day how very pretty you look in—in that hat and everything. I sincerely trust the occasional compliment will not offend you?"

"I—I shouldn't think so," she dimpled, feeling suddenly as young and gay and pretty as any other bride going off on her honeymoon. "Thank you, Robert, and I shall endeavour to do you credit on all occasions."

"Good! I want us to enjoy this holiday, Diana. It'll do us both good. Let's behave quite naturally together and not allow other people to embarrass us with ridiculous innuendoes. I know it must have been difficult for you at the reception, but we'll be by ourselves at the villa in Sole. Alone, that is, except for Juan and Rosita, who sleep in the village, anyway. These Latins think the English are crackpots, anyhow, and they won't be surprised at anything we do, or don't do."

"Such as separate bedrooms?" Diana asked frankly.

"Such as separate bedrooms," he nodded, glad that she had had the courage to mention the subject. "You will always have your own room, Diana. Trust me."

By two-thirty they were airborne over the Channel, climbing through and above the bank of snow cloud and into the sunshine glistening over southern Europe on this winter's day. At Palma, in Majorca, where they left the plane and climbed into a hired car, it was as hot as an English June and there were roses in the gardens of the villas they passed, to prove it. Robert drove carefully on the coastal road to Sole in the short evening twilight. There was not

much traffic, but it was of the unexpected variety, an ambling, unlit mule-cart, a rickety bicycle, a howling motorcycle, a shambling, overladen bus, and at last, after a brief, hair-raising climb, they reached the white villa which Robert had rented from a friend and with which went the young married couple who were employed to see to the creature comforts of the newly-weds.

A rich Spanish supper had been quickly disposed of, and then Rosita, giggling, told Diana she had turned down the bedclothes. Upon investigation Diana saw, with horror, Robert's pyjamas lying beside her nightdress-case on a bed of ample proportions, even by Spanish standards. She couldn't find another bedroom, and it was while she was looking that Robert appeared, took his pyjamas and, wishing her a very goodnight, pointedly closed the door between them.

Where Robert had spent the night, Diana couldn't imagine, for she couldn't remember seeing a sofa in the living-room.

She slid out of bed and went to the window, looking down on a bay of the Mediterranean sparkling in the sunlight. A few boats bobbed at anchor, and two men, beachcombers or shrimpers, waded among the weed in the rock pools of the cove beneath the Villa Manzanas. Why the "Villa of Apples"? she wondered. There were plenty of orange and lemon trees in the compound, even a vine and apricot trees and almonds, but no apples. She must remember to ask Robert about it.

Feeling excited, she put on her dressing-gown and sought the bathroom, having learnt the geography of the villa the previous evening.

"Oh, Robert!" she exclaimed, seeing him stretched out asleep on the bathroom floor. "So this is where you got to! But this won't do at all. You can't sleep here!"

"Why? What's wrong with it?" he asked, rubbing his eyes. "I slept like a top."

"You must have a proper bed," she told him. "If there isn't one we must buy one."

"No need for that," he assured her. "The servants would chatter."

"But you said they think the English are cracked . . ."

"But not as cracked as all that," he assured her. "You're a very pretty and attractive girl, Diana, and yesterday I

married you. Those are the facts. I don't want the locals to think there's anything wrong with you. Now I'll leave you to have your bath. Oh, and *buenos días, my dear!*"

"*Buenos días!*"

She soaked in the bath, as happy in the warmth of a man's spontaneous compliment as in the pleasantly warm water. It looked as though this marriage of convenience was already doing more for her feminine ego than she had hoped of it.

"But supposing I grow more attractive—what then?" she asked a little wistfully of the dancing sunlight on the ceiling. "What's the use of being attractive if it's all going to be wasted?"

She realised she should have thought of that sooner.

"I think I shall take you to Valdemosa before the weather breaks," Robert said on the fourth sunny day of their stay at the Villa Manzanas.

"This isn't England, you know," Diana teased him from across the table where they were having breakfast in the patio. "The weather is heavenly here."

"But it is winter," he warned her, "even in Majorca, and when it rains it sometimes doesn't know when to stop. A rainy spell can be really miserable and one is stuck in for days. So while the going's good we'd better go. Just a minute—" he stared at her. "You've got some freckles!" he announced in delight.

She squinted down at her nose.

"I know. Isn't it awful?" she wailed. "I tan beautifully in all the other places, but my nose will do that!"

"I like freckles," he decided gallantly. "The first girl I ever kissed had them."

"That—that must have been a long time ago," she ventured.

"Not all that long," he decided, forcing her to meet his eyes. "I was a slow starter at such things. But I'm pretty good at my job, if that's any compensation."

"I'm sure it is, Robert," she told him, wondering why she suddenly wanted to comfort him for something. Light, amoral pursuits were as much a thing of the past for her as for him; they both had to find outlet in their work from now on.

"Well," she rose and stretched in the towelling robe she wore which covered

her still damp swimming costume, "I'll go and change. When do you want to leave?"

"The driver I've hired is coming in half an hour. Will that suit you?"

She stopped in her tracks.

"You've hired a driver?" she echoed. "Why?"

"I'd rather trust a local than myself on the mountain roads, my dear. Also I want to be a passenger today, able to relax and point out the sights to you. By the way, I'd take a mac if I were you."

"Oh, Robert! They're such a nuisance to carry . . ."

"I'll carry it," he said quietly, and, looking at him, she realised that, unnatural though this marriage might be, one thing this man required in a wife was obedience.

"Very well, Robert," she agreed, and went on her way.

Was that warmth on her husband's countenance approval? she wondered.

The next moment he was frowning, however.

"The streets are cobbled at Valdemosa," he told her, "and your ankles will soon ache in those things." He nodded at the shoes.

"Oh, Robert," she mutinied, "you look so enormous beside me when I'm wearing flannels. Surely you don't want to demoralise me completely?"

"Very well," he relented, smiling. "If an extra three inches gives you the illusion of equality, I'll excuse the heels. I never regarded myself as enormous before. It's you who are tiny."

"I'm not!" she said indignantly. "I'm five foot three!"

They both laughed together, and then Robert introduced Manuel, who was a driver for a travel agency, normally, but this was the "off" season for him.

Diana had learned to have confidence in Robert's driving, but wasn't so sure of the local product as he seemed to be. Manuel seemed to have difficulty finding gears, and ground them in an agony of racket until the car shivered and shook like an ancient jalopy.

"They like the noise," Robert whispered, and she was amazed to find they were holding hands quite naturally in the back seat. "It reassures them. You'll see why in a few minutes when we really begin to climb. It's bottom gear all the way for five or six miles."

Though Robert was eager to point

out the wonderful views as they took the winding mountain road, Diana showed little interest for the first couple of miles, convinced that very little lay between the car in which they were driving and eternity. It seemed at times to hang suspended by two wheels over deep valleys, and there was always another hairpin bend just ahead. Something like cramp gripped her stomach as they made one such turn and abruptly scraped into the foot-high protecting wall—which was all there was between them and a veritable chasm falling sheer away towards a river bed far, far below—to make way for an old lorry coming in the opposite direction.

She had spontaneously hurled herself into Robert's arms, and now, as the car still whined upward, she felt herself shivering against him and his lips were near her ear saying gently: "There's really no need to worry. Manuel is very experienced."

Perhaps he thought in his heart of hearts that she was trying to start something which was outside their contract by such behaviour. In an agony of embarrassment she released herself, straightening her little hat and said, "I'm sorry," feeling something like bitterness in her mouth as she did so.

For his part he looked beyond her at the shimmer of sea and pondered. "I wish she wouldn't do these things. I'm not made of granite. One of these days I may do something impetuous and lose her trust. It's not going to be as easy as I thought."

"If you look down to the left," he said aloud, "you'll see the green roof and yellow shutters of the Villa Mazzanas. Like a dolls' house, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," she agreed, equally determined to keep their association on an impersonal level. She remembered she hadn't yet asked why it was called the house of the apples, among so many citrus fruits, and now did so.

"Well, actually," he said, "there's a local legend about that. The villagers say that a northern prince sent his beautiful only daughter to Majorca for her health, and after a time she craved only one thing which was peculiar to her native home, and that was a rosy apple. She had many suitors who brought her gifts, but said she would only marry the one who could present her with apples. Apparently in those days Majorca wasn't much for importing what it couldn't produce."

Diana laughed, feeling the situation to be eased.

"Do go on!" she urged. "Did the princess get her apples *and* her lover?"

"Wait for it, impatient one! There was one local laddie who loved the fair lady best, but hadn't so far been able to give her anything owing to his private economic situation. He had, however, a friend among the fairies, who had told him he could turn himself into anything he desired when required. The princess wanted apples, so what? Young Juan turned himself into an apple tree, and next morning, having eaten her fill of the fruit, the princess announced she would marry the donor if he would kindly step forward. Imagine her surprise when the tree turned back into Juan, rags, tatters, empty purse and all. The princess was horrified. 'Do it again!' she urged quickly, 'I want more apples.' After Juan had obliged she called her gardener over to chop down the tree, and that was the end of poor Juan."

"What a shame!" Diana said sympathetically. "I hope she swallowed a pip."

They had by now left sight of the sea and were hovering over a valley where every inch and corner was terraced and earthed to bear the indigenous almonds and lemon trees.

"I always thought of Majorca as a holiday paradise," Diana mused, "but I'm amazed by the industry of the people. They have made the whole island into a garden."

"Valldemosa!" Robert announced as they drove into a village which was built out of the crags overhanging the verdant valley. "It looks as though we've come on a feast day. They need very little excuse to make holiday up here, I can tell you, but it all adds to the colourfulness of the occasion. But first the monastery. Did you know George Sand brought Chopin here and that they occupied a cell in the monastery? Oh, yes. Goodness knows what sort of a museum they'll have made of it, but there are no monks nowadays. I suppose the brothers would turn in their graves if they realised that the place was renowned for sheltering two unblissed lovers from whose affair sprang some of the most divine music in the world."

Diana refused to admit that Robert had been right about the unsuitability

of her shoes for such an expedition, as she toiled behind him up and down miles of stone corridors and occasionally stumbled down unseen small steps into dark, smelly little cells, now museums of the glassblowers' art, and the potters' and the incense mixers'.

Diana discovered the glory of the monastery garden, and wondered if Albert Ketely had stayed there, too. She sat down on a low wall, in the sun, and removed her shoes with a sigh of utter relief, curling and uncurling her toes. At her right hand, had she reached, was a vine bearing bunches of ripe green grapes, even at this season; above her head hung pale yellow oranges, like lamps on a Christmas tree, and further along was another tree still in all the glory of blossom.

"Excuse me," came Robert's voice from the distance, "but have you seen my wife?"

Diana's heart leapt. She didn't know why. She jumped up and called, "I'm here, Robert, in the garden!" and when he joined her she was standing barefoot gazing down into the valley below.

"I—I've knocked my shoes over," she confessed, looking blankly up at him.

He began to laugh, and up there, at that altitude, the laughter was soon taken up by a thousand echoes so that she had to join in and laugh until she felt positively weak.

"Oh, well," he suddenly decided, "there's nothing else for it, I suppose," and he swept her up into his arms and looked down at her. "Isn't it a good thing you are only five foot three?" he asked whimsically as he bore her away into the shadow of the cloisters once more.

She clung to him and felt strangely constrained. How different this would have been had they really loved! Here, where lovers had walked, it was like cheating to remain unaffected by the romantic atmosphere. This exalted air made her think she and Robert were two candles to whom the lighted taper was forever forbidden.

She looked up at him, her lids feeling strangely heavy, to find him regarding her as morosely.

"I think perhaps you can walk now," he said, setting her down somewhat abruptly. "If it gets rough just shout out."

But she knew she wouldn't "shout

out" though her feet bled, and she knew that he knew this too, and for the second time that day she swallowed the bitterness of enforced repression.

Could it really be true that by being forced into close association with a man he could swiftly change from a stranger into someone wielding a strange compulsion over one's senses? Did he, likewise, admit her power over him?

During the drive back to Sole they sat fully a yard apart, conversing in monosyllables and expressing a gaiety obviously a little forced. Nothing had happened between them, and yet lack of event is often responsible for as much misunderstanding and misery between a normal man and woman as the basest over-indulgence.

Suddenly, the rain of which Robert had warned descended in torrents and went on for days and days until the only sounds about the Villa Manzanas were the drip from roof and eaves and the gurgling from the downpipes vieing with the splash of the swollen stream which dashed itself through a cleft in the rocks nearby and so joined the suddenly hostile grey swell of the sea.

In a way the time spent in waiting for the weather to become favourable was more memorable than all these. The newly-weds were thrown together in a more intimate setting, and sometimes Diana would raise her eyes from the book she wasn't really reading to find Robert's eyes thoughtfully upon her.

Once she said, "A penny for them," but he smiled without humour and decided, "No, you wouldn't be interested. Would you—er—like to talk some shop?"

They had tried, sitting together on the sofa with a textbook given over entirely to the functions and habits of connective tissue, with illustrations depicting the healing of a scar on a young child and the same scar on an old person.

"In the aged, of course," Robert said, "we can now rejuvenate as well as heal. The serum I find most beneficial is the American hormone extract known as . . ." His voice died away and then he said, urgently, "Would you mind sitting over there, please?"

Diana, who sensed nothing amiss, turned and declared, "But how can I see the illustrations if I do?"

She saw his face and the expression in his eyes unnerved and yet excited her. It was as though, while unwarmed and disarmed, an attractive enemy had

arrived at the gates and was battering down all defences.

"Oh, Robert!" she cried helplessly, and hid her burning face in her hands.

He leaned towards her, put his hands on her shoulders and, as she trembled submissively against him, kissed her in a way which began as an investigation and drew out into an agony of satisfaction.

"It's no use!" he suddenly decided, jumping up and striding over to the window. "I'm sorry, Dil!" It was the first time he had used the diminutive. "It's this blasted rain and having nothing to do!"

"Please — please don't apologise, Robert," she said quickly. "Really, I didn't mind."

He looked at her again, paced once more and then said, "You should, and I do. We both know what's up, don't we? We're male and female, natural elements caged up temporarily together and beset by purely natural urges. If we gave in to them where would we be in a month's time? I'll tell you — hating one another's guts and regretting this whole situation. I respect you, Diana, I really do, and if I can claim your friendship as time goes by I wouldn't exchange it for — for what we nearly got ourselves into there. You do understand and — forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Robert," she said weakly, "unless I'm to ask to be forgiven, too. You didn't attack me. What happened was quite mutual."

"Perhaps," he said crisply, "and I suppose it had to happen some time and more likely here than at home where we'll both be fully occupied in other ways. You needn't worry, Diana, it won't happen again."

"I wish you wouldn't make a crime of it!" she almost snapped. "After all, a kiss —! People are kissing casually all the time."

He looked down at her coldly.

"That wasn't a casual salute, and well you know it, Diana," he said frankly. "Propinquity has brought about the discovery that we are physically attractive to one another, therefore it's just something to beware of in future. I'm sure the last thing we want is a relationship in a purely physical sense. We had our 'marriage' all planned out very nicely, and that sort of thing wasn't included in the itinerary. Now do you see why I want to be sure you're still sure of me?"

His eyes held a pleading for assurance that all was as it had been between them, and yet Diana knew she had lived through one of the most memorable moments of her life with her lips locked to those of Robert Taunton. She still felt shaken by the experience; frankly she didn't want to have someone minimise its importance, which was what Robert insisted on doing. She knew she would never feel the same about him again: from this moment on he was the volcano whose power to erupt stirred the smouldering fires burning in her own breast. She could never forget he was the man who had made her feel all woman for an instant; it was probably for this knowledge henceforward that she would respect him most though she would never admit it to him or anyone else.

"No harm has been done, Robert," she told him gravely, "and now I think I'll go and lie down until dinner-time. You stretch out on the sofa and relax with a book or — or something. The rain will stop soon. You'll see."

It did, during the night, and next day the brave sun shone out again and the sea became greenly-blue and calm as a mill-pond.

So gay and light-hearted did Robert appear to be that Diana at times wondered if he even remembered the portentous occurrence of the previous afternoon.

"Women are preoccupied with romance, unfortunately," she thought darkly as they prepared to go down to the cove for a swim, "whereas our lords and masters are much more down-to-earth about such things. Oh, well, if I imagined for a moment my big love affair was going to develop in present company, I can see I have another think coming. So I'd better make the best of things and at least enjoy my swim."

Which she did, to such an extent that she swam out too far, turned, and found her strokes weakening as she realised how far she still had to go.

"Robert!" she cried out urgently, and there was a moment of absolute blind panic as she beheld him cleaving gently through the water, quite unaware of her own lack of prowess in this element.

"Robert!" she positively screamed, and beat desperately at the water.

"Stop it, Dil!" his voice halted her sharp, frightened sobbing. "Roll on

your back and float. I'll get you. Good girl!"

She obeyed implicitly, even though she seemed to be travelling further out to sea once she ceased to resist. It seemed ages before she heard Robert's encouraging "Hold on!" and then felt his presence beside her.

"I warn you, I shall knock you out if you struggle or do anything silly," he said sternly. "It's a long swim back and I'd rather tow you relaxed than all tensed up. Now be a good girl and leave everything to me."

Once they were in the shallows again she could hear him breathing laboriously and yet he found the strength to pick her up and deposit her high and dry upon the sand beyond reach of the sea.

They lay side by side, recovering, she feeling a strange almost unreal sensation of utter peace and tranquillity.

"Are you—all right, Robert?" she asked at length, knowing there was no

way of thanking him and that her thanks were not expected.

"Yes, thank you, Di," he said from deep, deep down, then he breathed heavily, smiled, turned over on his side and pinched her cheek with something akin to affection.

"You know," he said cheerfully, "I'm beginning to think I might have trouble with you, one way and another."

She laughed weakly. It was absurd, of course, but having just been rescued from drowning she suddenly felt unaccountably happy lying there on the white, sparkling sand with her hair full of the gritty particles.

"I shall hope to come up to expectations in other ways," she retorted cheekily. "I suppose you're due for a pleasant surprise."

"I've already had one," he said ambiguously. "Now shall we dress and go for a drink somewhere?"

CHAPTER FOUR

TOUGH Robert started work immediately on their return to Farlingham, Diana had a week before her own appointment at the clinic came into effect.

She was glad of this respite, for it gave her a chance to get to know Devon Place rather better, for it was a rambling house and many of the rooms had been shut, the furniture looking ghost-like under dust-sheets.

From Mrs. Dawkes she learned a great deal more about her husband than she knew already. The woman was prone to gossiping, but never ceased to busy herself while she was doing so, so Diana did not object to her meanderings.

"My, Mrs. Taunton," she said on one occasion, "but I have reason to bless the day I met the DOCTOR . . ." she always said doctor, when referring to Robert, as though it was in capitals . . . "You wouldn't think my Tom had been born with a hare-lip, would you?"

"Was he?" Diana asked with sudden interest. "No, I wouldn't, Mrs. Dawkes. I never noticed a scar, any speech impediment . . . anything . . ."

"Well, he was," the other asserted, as though there had been an argument.

She lowered her voice an octave. "Even my Tom doesn't know. He was done when he was four, you see, by Doctor, just after he learned to do these things. I was that grateful. I wouldn't let Tommy play with other children when he was like that, you see, because you know how cruel kids can be. When I saw him, as normal as any other little boy, I swore that I'd do anything for Doctor and, funny enough, when Tom got bigger he came home one day, all proud like, and said he had earned a shilling for the scouts washing a car down. It turned out to be Doctor's car, and Tom's been hanging round the garage here ever since. Funny, isn't it, how things work out? You'd swear Tom knew, but he doesn't. Only Doctor, myself and now you know, Mrs. Taunton, but I thought you'd like to."

"I shall respect your confidence, Mrs. Dawkes," Diana assured the woman. "What was that? I thought I heard someone!"

There was no one in the passage outside the kitchen however.

"Might have been the cat," Mrs. Dawkes opined from the sink. "He

likes to sleep in the conservatory where it's warm."

"Well, if you're clear about dinner, Mrs. Dawkes, I'll go and write a letter," Diana said. "Don't forget I'll be going to the shops in about an hour, and can order whatever you need."

She had to pass the sitting-room on her way to the cosier study, and therein she espied a tall figure looking out on the winter garden.

"Why, Miss Hayling!" she greeted, her hand outstretched in friendship. "I didn't hear you arrive."

"I only came a moment ago," the other smiled coolly, touching Diana's fingers briefly with her gloved hand. "Your maid let me in. This house is positively crawling with people nowadays, isn't it? I remember the time when Robert couldn't keep anybody for more than a week. You must have tamed him, my dear."

"I wouldn't know about that," Diana said guardedly, "but I shouldn't think anyone could 'tame' Robert unless he wanted to be tamed. Would you join me in the study for coffee? There's an open fire in there and it's much more homely."

"Why haven't you had a clean sweep?" Joan Hayling asked, eying the study furniture disapprovingly. "You've done nothing. The house is exactly the same as it always was, almost as though Robert hadn't married."

Diana glanced swiftly at the other, wondering what she knew—or suspected. Robert had always used Matron as his confidante; had he also confided that this was a marriage in name only? "I rather like everything the way it is," she said mildly, "but I had thought of consulting Liz with a view to having a bedroom and sitting-room decorated and furnished for her own use. After all, she'll be preparing for her 'O' level examinations soon, and that would give her somewhere in which to shut herself away."

"Why?" Joan Hayling asked dully, stirring the coffee the other had passed to her. "Don't you want to be bothered having Liz around your apartments?"

"It's not that at all," Diana said, feeling her hackles rising against her will. "Young people like their privacy the same as adults."

"Mind you," Joan said confidentially, as though Diana hadn't explained, "I don't blame you for not wanting Liz around all the time. She's a child who

is best taken in small doses. Of course Robert can't see it, but she's the most spoiled brat in this town."

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," Diana demurred. "I find her quite tractable. She has been spoiled to some extent, of course, but she's too naturally charming to have allowed it to affect her true character."

"Now, tell me," Joan leaned forward to say eagerly, as though having tired of the subject of Elizabeth, "how was Majorca? What did you do?"

Diana allowed herself to be drawn, being still under the spell of the spring-like warmth and sunshine bathing the enchanted island. She rambled on at some length, then Joan rose, drew her fur-collared coat about her and laughed strangely.

"For a honeymoon couple you two dear things kept amazingly busy, didn't you?" she asked, apparently ingenuously. "I've heard of some newly-marrieds who scarcely remembered where they had been for their honeymoon, let alone what they did, *and* in such detail . . ." She laughed lightly again, and Diana knew she was not merely teasing. Here was an enemy in the camp; her enemy if not Robert's.

"It takes all sorts to make a world, Miss Hayling," she shrugged. "Now, I mustn't keep you any longer. I'll see you out."

"And good riddance, you prying cat!" she thought angrily, as the tall, svelte figure of Robert's matron sailed down the drive to enjoy the rest of her off-duty elsewhere.

Her irritation due to the unexpected visitation lasted all day, so that she was over-ready to greet Robert across the dinner table, where they met for the first time that day, with, "Does Miss Hayling know about us?"

Robert cooled immediately. He had been regarding his "wife", her cheeks flushed and wearing a becoming yet simple velvet dinner dress, with approval until that moment.

"If you mean does Joan know the terms of our contract—no, she does not," he said coldly. "I'm not in the habit of discussing my most personal business with anybody not immediately concerned. It might be as well for you to observe that rule, Diana," he continued with an elegant frown. "Whatever your private opinion of my guardianship of Liz, I prefer not to hear

secondhand that you consider I've utterly spoilt the child."

Diana almost choked over her soup. "Am I being accused of something?" she demanded angrily.

"Yes," he answered crisply, "gossiping. Allowing your tongue to run away with you. I know women chatter to one another, about hats and knitting patterns and such like, but I didn't expect Joan to come back to the clinic at tea-time and regale me with a diary of our stay in Majorca. It—it wasn't delicate," he chided.

Diana kept her temper with an effort.

"Miss Hayling will not be welcome here again," she announced grimly, "so will you tell her, Robert, or shall I?"

"Don't be childish, Diana," he told her sharply. "That's another thing. You've made it clear that you don't like Joan."

"I have?" she enquired, a high spot of colour on each cheek. "Bully for me!"

"But that sort of thing won't do, you know. You have to make up your mind to get on with Joan. At the clinic she's invaluable. I don't know how I'd get on without her."

"I was always taught no one is indispensable," Diana volunteered.

"Well, Joan is to me," he suddenly flared, "so please keep your nasty little tongue from attacking her."

It was now an open quarrel, and Diana felt the yoke of the marital tie suddenly heavier than she was prepared to bear. She would have liked to have felt free to tell this man to go to hell and pack and leave him for ever.

Instead, however, she finished her meal in silence, asked to be excused and made her way with dignity to her large, pleasant room on the first floor. For a long time she sat staring into space, then knock surprised her, a knock on the door leading to the dressing-room which usually separated her from Robert.

"Come in!" she invited, beginning to brush her hair industriously.

Robert stood revealed.

"May—may I speak with you?" he asked stiffly.

"Certainly. I'll come down in a minute."

"No, here, if you don't mind. I just want to talk."

"Very well, then. Sit down," she invited. Her heart felt like a flint in

her chest. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Us, of course. We had a row—our first. I suppose there had to be a clash between us sooner or later, but now that it's happened I feel rather miserable. I don't know how you feel, but I'd like to be friends again."

"I don't know whether that's possible," Diana said bitterly, "as long as you set such great store by the word of the person who caused this rift between us."

"You mean—Joan?"

"I mean Joan. Someone has got to come first with you, Robert; you can't divide loyalty. What was discussed between us over the coffee cups this morning was not worth repeating, yet she chose to repeat it, giving her version, suitably embellished, for your delectation. You didn't even ask me what I said, you *told* me, and I can tell you that you've got the wrong end of the stick entirely. Joan may be indispensable to your clinic, but after this she's dispensable to this household at all times when you're not in it. Had you chosen to ask *me* what we talked about I would have told you the truth, that I tried politely to answer all her questions without giving too much away. I also agreed with her that to some extent Liz was spoilt, but I also enumerated the child's more obvious virtues. I like Liz, and when outsiders say anything detrimental to her my loyalty comes uppermost."

She hung her head, regarded her nails and waited for him to speak.

"I think I see your point, Di," he said wearily. "Forgive me. You think my loyalty to you is suspect. Actually that isn't so. I told Joan what a—grand little wife you are. I said things about you I couldn't say to your face."

Now he was embarrassed.

"We must have known it wasn't going to be easy," he continued, "that misunderstandings occur even in the best regulated families. That's what we are now," he pondered, "a family. You and me and Liz. Forgive me, Diana?"

Thus hearing his appeal, she relented immediately.

"It was as much my fault, Robert," she said generously. "I'm sorry, too."

"Come and have a game of chess?" he invited eagerly, "or cribbage?"

"I'm a poor chess player," she said

uncertainly, "and I don't know how to play cribbage."

"Come on and I'll show you." He took her arm and they went downstairs together. "Now that I've grown used to having you around, Di," he confided, "it felt awfully cold and lonely down here without you."

A little warmth crept back around her heart and she discovered the world is not such a bad place after all when somebody needs you, even though they need you only sometimes and as a partner for table games.

After another month this "marriage of true minds" actually appeared to be working out as intended. Diana reported for duty at the clinic, asking no favours or privileges as the principal's wife. This attitude was immediately appreciated by the rest of the staff in general, and the newcomer was naturally on the alert for any move by Matron Hayling likely to cause a further deterioration in her relationship with Robert. She gave Matron a wide berth whenever possible, was polite and deferential when they did meet and as talkative about anything not relating to clinical business as a clam.

Once or twice Joan Hayling launched a friendly gambit, in front of Robert, and then Diana played back cleverly and withdrew.

"Your wife just can't bear me, Robert," Joan sighed on one occasion. "She's too sweet to say so outright, of course, but it troubles me. The old happy atmosphere of this place has gone. Still"—she smiled bravely—"so long as she makes you happy, Robert . . ."

Naturally Robert pondered on these words. Diana must be a vengeful person on the quiet and nursing an impossible grievance against Joan, who, he was sure, had meant no harm by repeating that woman-gossip. He hesitated to re-open the subject of the Matron with his wife, and when he did once take courage and ask, "How do you get on with Joan, Di?" she replied, in hospital vernacular:

"As well as can be expected, thank you," and so he wasn't any wiser.

Her work, Diana found was compensation for the petty trials she had occasionally to endure. Not only were Robert's "specials" admitted to the clinic, but other specialists' private patients also. Thus she found herself

assisting her husband; Mr. Argyle (when there was no accommodation in St. John's for his numerous cases) and Hugh Redbarn, whose speciality was neuro-surgery.

The variety was extremely satisfying, and after each surgical exploit Diana was required to write up the method of operation and both pre- and post-operative treatments. Robert was a slave-driver over the paper work, and when she complained that she was tired or had this or that to do he snapped, "Learn shorthand, then. You need to get everything down while it's fresh in your mind. I tell you, Doctor Di, if you're ever going to take your membership in surgery, let alone your Fellowship and your Master's certificate, you'll find it's ninety per cent paper-work and only the odd ten practical which is required by the examining bodies."

He had started addressing her as "Doctor Di" after one of the patients had christened her thus to separate their identities. "It's so difficult having two Taumtons," the woman had smiled, "and Di is such a pretty diminutive."

Promptly at four-thirty each Friday afternoon Liz arrived home for the week-end. Until nine-thirty on Monday mornings she felt as free and happy as a foal turned loose in a field. Her energy was colossal, her enthusiasms fierce and short-lived. While these were of a practical nature, such as stamp-collecting, knitting, painting in oils or petit-point, nobody else was unduly put out; but on one particular Friday Liz brought home her latest requisition, which was human, a girl in a higher form at their school, and a young lady who lapped up the younger girl's devotion as no more than her due.

"Hello, Yvonne!" Liz greeted as the maid opened the front door and then gaped at the two. "Cherith will be staying the week-end. We'll have tea in my room immediately."

"Miss Liz," Yvonne protested. "I didn't know about this! Why wasn't I told?"

Cherith looked down her long, aristocratic nose.

"Really, my girl," she said disapprovingly, "you shouldn't question the family, should you? Miss Elizabeta is quite free, I trust, to bring a friend home if she so wishes?"

They sailed upstairs while Yvonne stared, her mouth still open.

On the landing above Liz collapsed into giggles.

"I say, Cherith," she said admiringly, "you shouldn't have spoken like that to our maid, should you?"

"Why not?" the other demanded. "One has to keep these people in their places. Fancy allowing her to call you Liz! You don't look like a Liz. I shall continue to address you as Elizabetha, and gradually, you'll see, everybody will copy my example."

"I believe they will," Liz assured her adored one. "This is my room, Cherith. It's a bit pokey, but—"

"Why! this is a *nursery*!" the other exclaimed. "My dear Elizabetha, it isn't *you*!"

"I know," the other agreed in embarrassment. "Di is going to have my own suite done up for me, but you know how busy doctors are, having one for a father yourself. My new rooms will overlook the garden," she went on. "Would you like to see them, Cherith? Maybe you and I could discuss the décor."

"How do your guardians sleep?" Cherith asked casually as they went along the carpeted corridors.

"Quite well, I think," Liz opined.

"Stupid little Elizabetha! I meant are they moderns or old-fashioned? Do they sleep in a double bed or in twinnies?"

"I—I really don't know," Liz said shyly. "I haven't been home much or really thought about it."

Meanwhile Diana had arrived home to find Yvonne in tears and unwilling to say why. An angry Mrs. Dawkes supplied the information, however, and Diana went out into the hall to find the two youngsters descending the stairs together.

"Hello, Di!" greeted Liz. "Er—this is Cherith Redbarn."

Diana and the visitor assessed one another briefly as they shook hands.

"I think you know Hugh?" Cherith regally enquired. "My father, you know. He has mentioned you, I believe."

"I do know Mr. Redbarn," Diana nodded. Only that afternoon Hugh Redbarn had offended her by attempting to embrace her in the anaesthetic room. He was a clever surgeon and a good-looking Latin type who fancied himself irresistible to women. Regarding his daughter, Diana found that here was another member of the family equally offensive in a different way.

"I think it's time Cherith went home now, Liz," she suggested. "It's almost six o'clock."

"Well, actually," the older girl said brightly, "I've come to stay. That is, Elizabetha invited me."

"Oh? But she didn't ask, I'm afraid, and so it isn't convenient," Diana said equably. "Some other time, perhaps . . . ?"

Cherith looked uncertainly at her friend, who was ridiculously tongue-tied all of a sudden.

"My dear, how quaint! You have to *ask*!" She turned back insolently to Diana. "Fortunately Mother is extremely up to date about such things. I have an absolutely free hand."

"So has Elizabeth," Diana said levelly, "providing she has the good manners to ask a little in advance so that everyone is prepared. After all, there's the staff to consider. If everyone had too free a hand they mightn't get their full time off or the shopping done."

Cherith sensed she had met her match and turned away.

"See you on Monday, I suppose, Liz," she said savagely, thus indicating their friendship was over. "Don't bother to see me out. I can manage."

Liz's lower lip trembled as the front door shut resoundingly. She flung away from Diana as she felt a light touch on her shoulder.

"Leave me alone!" she said savagely. "I've been humiliated enough. I—I think I *hate* you at this moment!"

There was nothing for it but to let her cool down, Diana knew, though she longed to follow the rebel upstairs and console her.

Robert heard the whole story from his niece's lips and then came into the sitting-room looking sheepish.

"I—I think she's feeling better now," he said. "She's asked for some supper to be sent up. You—er—don't think you were a bit high-handed, Di?"

"I do not. I simply sent a precocious and insolent little monster packing. You should have heard her patronising me!"

"Well"—he still looked uneasy—"we can't choose Liz's friends for her, can we? If she likes this girl . . ."

"I don't think she does, really. She's fascinated by her, which is a different thing entirely."

It was almost midnight before Liz, having had a struggle with her better nature, at last acknowledged defeat

and crept in search of the one who could give her conscience the quiet it needed to allow her to sleep. She hesitated outside her Uncle Rob's bedroom door and listened. You could almost always tell when there were two people together, and she was convinced he was sleeping alone.

Shivering, though the house hadn't been cold since Diana had come and insisted on the central-heating plant being overhauled and modernised, she went along and paused outside the other bedroom door, where a thin line of light showed that Diana wasn't asleep either.

Liz tapped on the door.

"Ye-es?" came Diana's voice in somewhat of a flurry. "Who—who's that?"

Liz turned the handle and entered, her eyes downcast. Without a word she crept into bed alongside the other and buried her hot face into the cool fragrance of ribbons and soft, feminine flesh.

"I—I don't hate you really, Di," she blurted out. "I'm sorry."

"So am I darling, if I embarrassed you in front of your friend. She rattled me, you see, as she had rattled Yvonne, but you have a perfect right to choose your friends and I'll be happy to ask Cherith to stay if you want me to."

"No, that's all right," Liz assured her. "Cherith is a bit of a bore, I suppose. Actually I'd be happier talking about something else which bothers me. Part of the 'taboo' subject. You understand?"

"I hope there's nothing 'taboo' between you and me, Liz. What is it?"

"And you'll answer?"

"If I can."

"You can if you will. Why don't you and Uncle Rob sleep together?"

Diana, who had been collecting herself to answer a purely biological type of question, felt herself to be stumped by this.

"You see, you won't answer!" Liz accused. "Cherith says—"

"What's Cherith got to do with it?"

"Well, I think she suspects you don't occupy the same room. She says we young people ought to know how our elders behave, as it affects our futures."

"She was quite a busy little mischief-making bee while she was here, wasn't she?" Diana asked acidly.

"Why don't you sleep together?" Liz insisted, the theme having developed

in her mind like a cancer. "Other married people do."

"No reason!" said Diana firmly. "There's nothing to stop us. Robert's just"—she waved her arm vaguely—"through there."

"You mean you do sometimes?"

"Of course," Diana said promptly. "We're married, aren't we?"

"It's important to me," Liz suddenly said dramatically. "I don't want you and Uncle Rob to separate, Di. You won't, will you?"

"No, you silly child. Now you must calm down and get some sleep. Do you want to stay in here with me?"

"No, thanks. I—I want you to go and sleep with him. Go on! Prove Cherith wrong, please, Di! Please!"

Diana knew how important it was for her to win Liz's confidence once and for all time. Cherith had planted the seed of doubt, now it must be uprooted if it was to do no further harm.

"Very well, then," she said, slipping out of bed and sliding her feet into mules. "I was by myself tonight because I was working, and your uncle isn't going to appreciate being awakened from his beauty sleep one little bit. Have we still to go through with it?"

"Yes," Liz said stubbornly.

"Come on, then." Diana tried to look as though she unlocked the door leading to the dressing-room every night. Liz was still inclined to be full of vague suspicions.

"Why do you lock yourself in?" she demanded.

"I don't. I lock other people out." Liz raised her brows. "The dressing-room window is left open for air and I'm scared of burglars."

Liz actually laughed.

Diana opened Robert's door and turned to say, unnecessarily, "He is asleep. Poor darling!"

"Go on!" Liz urged.

"Very well." Diana switched on Robert's light, hoping he would understand what all the commotion was about. She hadn't seen him in his pyjamas since that first night in Majorca and felt shy of touching him.

"Get into bed," Liz said from the doorway. "He's your husband, isn't he?"

"Of course, and I will, but you go along now."

"I'll just have to kiss Uncle Robert before I go, and tell him we've made it up, you and I."



"I—I don't hate you really, Di," she blurted out. "I'm sorry!"

"That will be nice," Diana said, sliding under Robert's bedclothes gingerly, and hoping he was a heavy sleeper. "I'll tell him we've made it up. You run along now."

"You look funny," Liz decided, "as though you're afraid of touching him."

"Well, I'm not," said Diana, and stroked Robert's cheek so that he made a little grunting noise and rolled over towards her, his arm enveloping her in the most natural manner imaginable.

"That's better," Liz decided from the threshold. "That's how married people should be." She yawned suggestively and happily. "As long as I know everything's all right I'll just get into your bed for the rest of the night, Di, if you don't mind. Shall I put the light out for you?"

"No, thanks. I'll put it out over the bed."

Once the door was shut on the departing girl Diana panicked swiftly. Robert's arm was imprisoning her and yet she dreaded waking him up to face this present situation. It was impossible, however, to stay as she was all night. Perhaps if she lay still it would give Liz a chance to get off to sleep and Robert would change his position, thus releasing her. But he seemed to be

enjoying his dreams, and apart from an occasional sigh stayed still, so that eventually she tugged more and more determinedly until he awoke and proceeded to make such a noise that she had to put her hand over his mouth in desperation.

"Robert, be quiet!" she warned. "It's nearly one o'clock. I couldn't get away from you without waking you."

His eyes, which had been eloquent enough over her silencing hand, now were horrified.

"Did—did I molest you in my sleep?" he demanded. "Di, I swear I knew nothing about it. I—"

"No, no," she told him. "It wasn't anything like that. It was Liz. She came to my room, and was upset by something that wretched Cherith had told her. She was worried about the possibility of a separation. Nothing would serve but that I come in here to you, and to make things more difficult she's through there in *my* bed. What are we to do?"

Robert said, "We could go to sleep." "Together?" She threw the bedclothes off impatiently. "I might have known you'd be no help!"

She suddenly became aware of the transparency of her nightdress and Robert's kindly, interested, masculine gaze, and dodged back under the clothes.

"You go," she said.

"Where to?" he asked. "Liz may pop in again in the morning to make sure the connubial knot is firmly tied. What then?"

Diana began to feel annoyed, suspecting his sense of humour of drawing out the untenable situation.

"I think we could be very comfortable as we are," he decided, and then came into contact with a cool, soft feminine thigh. "As you say, I'd better go," he suddenly changed his mind, and, throwing his dressing gown around his shoulders, left her in possession of his bed without venturing a single backward glance.

The thing Diana most disliked about their marriage partnership was the entertaining. Sometimes twice a week they had people to dinner, and were invited out as often. She particularly disliked it when Hugh Redbarn was one of their guests. Hugh not only thought himself a charmer, but played at love-making persistently in both public and private. He complimented Robert on his "lovely wife" and said he would "pinch her off him if he could", so "watch out, old chap". He chuckled Diana's chin and cheek in front of Robert and cornered her in the hall when Robert was not looking and tried to kiss her.

"Stop it, you oaf!" she said angrily.

"Temper!" Hugh said mildly. "A real little shrew she'd have us think. Ah! I like 'em when they resist. It keeps my interest warm."

"I think you ought to marry again and settle down," Diana said scathingly.

"I agree. You, too," Hugh advised. "Oh, I know you're married, but you're by no means 'settled down', young lady. One can tell."

"Can tell what?" she demanded.

"I've heard a rumour you and Robert are in business together. A purely business arrangement."

Diana was so agitated by this that she forgot to deny it.

"Who told you?" she wanted to know.

"Oh, somebody or other. Does it matter?" and he came suggestively near again.

Robert appeared and saw and suggested the couple join the other guests.

"Just a spot of postman's knock, old chap," Hugh said insolently. "Why don't we all play?"

When the last guest had gone Diana had to get things off her chest.

"Robert, Hugh Redbarn annoys me. Why do you let him?"

"Why do you?" he demanded. "You forget that in this contract we're both free agents, Diana. I can't deny you the occasional flirtation if I'm not prepared to become involved with you myself. I believe a woman's ego demands a man's openly expressed admiration. I've promised to protect you from Lester, and if Redbarn's attentions are unwelcome and you need any help from me in repulsing him, I'll gladly supply my own particular deterrent. But a woman who doesn't want a man's attentions usually makes things very clear for herself. Have you, perhaps, stayed Hugh with only one hand while beckoning with the other? Be honest with yourself, my dear Di. Be honest."

She stared at his broad back in hurt astonishment, feeling as though he had struck her for the first time in their acquaintance.

CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER three months of this twilight life, which was half-marriage, Diana took an important examination and then had a couple of days' leave in which to relax and ruminante. She decided to go and see her father, for he was not the best of correspondents and most of her news of him came over the telephone in three-minute

conversations. He refused to pay, or allow her to pay, for extra time.

She was amazed on arriving at the station in Southerton, however, to find Nigel awaiting her in a brand-new Hillman.

"Surprise! Surprise!" he greeted, as though nothing had ever come amiss between them. "I'll bet you wonder

what I'm doing here, *Mrs. Taunton?*"

"I do, yes," she admitted, and held out her hand in greeting, "but first, how are you, Nigel?"

"Shake hands with *you?*" he asked derisively. "You can't mean it. Give your old, rejected sweetheart a kiss!"

She felt vaguely uneasy as she complied. Though Robert had as good as told her to go ahead and flirt if she wanted to, she never really wanted to and felt other men's lips offered insult to the man who was her husband in law.

"Now tell me," she urged, as she sat in the car beside Nigel. "I heard you left St. John's . . ."

"Yes—well," he grimaced, "that Raynham girl was after my blood. When the nursing staff of a hospital combine together to give a mere medico pure hell, you've had it in a big way, I can tell you. Anyhow, I'm in your dad's firm. Oh—he didn't appoint me. The old boy still doesn't approve of me. But Briggs thought I had the makings of a bedside manner, and I do all his donkey work. General practice isn't bad, you know. You should try it some time, Diana."

"Out of all Britain," she said in a tone of wonderment, "why Southerton, Nigel?"

"Why not?" he hedged. "I knew of it through you. I may even have pondered that if I was ever to see you again Southerton was where it would be. I grew tired of trying to get past watchdog Taunton to see you."

"You tried?" she enquired.

"Of course I tried. You were my girl before ever you were his, and I never changed towards you. He made me tell lies to save your face, and then pinched you off me. I shall never forgive him—or you."

Though this was said mildly and smilingly, Diana knew it was seriously meant.

"What's done is done, Nigel. Let's make the best of things."

"Rather," he said enthusiastically. "You're here and I'm here, and after surgery this evening I thought we might go somewhere and dance. You can't refuse me for old times' sake, can you, Diana?"

She said she would see, which he knew was an acceptance, and in an uneasy sort of way she found herself looking forward to the evening. Nigel was a wonderful dancer whereas Robert

didn't dance at all. She had been working so hard these past weeks that she felt the need for relaxation entirely out of the province of doctors and their usual environments.

She found her father well, extremely glad to see her, yet surprisingly incurious about her marriage.

"I somehow don't think it was the kind of 'do' your mother would have approved of, *Dinah*," he said, using his own pet name for her, "but I know you've a wise head on your young shoulders and wouldn't do anything against your conscience. You've got a good husband, anyway."

"I have, Daddy," she assured him. "I really have. Robert's worked hard to get me through this exam. For his sake I hope I've passed."

They dined early and then Doctor Wills attended his evening surgery. Diana had told him earlier she would be going out and might not return until late.

"Let me have a key, Daddy," she requested, "and I won't wake you up."

It was early April and the air was cool and sweet with spring scents when Nigel called for her promptly at eight-thirty. He glanced appreciatively at her; she was wearing a slim-line tangerine velvet dress and a mink jacket lay loosely round her shoulders.

"You married a richer man, anyway, Diana," he said, as though in consolation for something. "You look like a million dollars."

"Robert is very generous," she agreed readily. "He likes me to dress well, and this jacket was his wedding present to me."

"I was surprised when you married him, you know," Nigel said as he let in the clutch and the car slid forward. "You obviously couldn't have fallen in love with the fellow in the time. I was barely cool in the dog-house before you were *Mrs. T.* I decided there was something behind it all, a rather clever mutual arrangement, perhaps, and that sex never reared its ugly head between you. Am I slightly warm?"

"Watch where you're going, Nigel!" Diana warned him coldly. "I don't discuss my marriage with you or anybody."

"Good! I hope that means we can forget it for tonight."

Nigel had always had a penchant for discovering places of entertainment which thrived by keeping their activities

a hair's-breadth within the letter of the law, and were not above stepping out of bounds occasionally, especially where the licensing laws were concerned. The club they went to on the London road out of Southerton was one such place.

It was an alien atmosphere to Diana, the svelte, bare-shouldered women and their exquisitely tonsured and pomaded escorts. Nigel scattered his hails hither and thither as though he was a familiar figure in this establishment. The other women eyed her as a stranger and resented her as a beauty; she had suddenly bloomed as a real beauty since she had learned the arts of perfect grooming as Robert's wife, which fact had not escaped her covetous escort.

There were no introductions, and as a waiter had showed them to a dimly-lit corner table behind a screening palm Diana thought, "We're probably all other men's wives with other women's husbands and sweethearts escorting us. It's that sort of place."

But the wine was good and the dance-band excellent.

Determined to enjoy herself after all the slogging she had done, Diana danced every dance, and the more champagne she drank the lighter became her brawled feet.

"I say," Nigel said admiringly, "you're wearing me out, Diana. Stop for breath, for my sake if not your own."

Diana laughed as champagne bubbles tickled her nose. She hadn't had a lot to drink, but she was by now convinced that she had passed her membership examination with flying colours. This, of course, made her very happy and she asked for more champagne.

Nigel said it couldn't be done as it was after hours. The waiter bent low and whispered something, and Nigel leaned over to Diana and asked, "Have you a fiver, old thing? That'll put the clock back."

Not realising the import of these words, Diana took a crisp note from her evening bag and handed it over. The waiter returned with another bottle of champagne and as the cork popped and the golden liquid was poured she felt her inhibitions rolling away and allowed her eyes to melt into Nigel's across the table. His hand sought hers and she didn't withdraw it.

"Come outside for a breath of air, darling," he urged, and somehow he had taken on Robert's identity; he was about the same height; she imagined that

Robert's arms were around her in the cool night air and that Robert's lips were descending to seal a new contract between them.

But they were not Robert's lips, and she woke instantly from her dream to protest, "Stop it, Nigel! This is all wrong. Take me home!"

"So now you don't want to play?" he demanded crossly. "You've been leading me on all evening, and—" he held her fiercely, stilling her cries with cruel, angry, masculine kisses.

"Inside, sir, madam, if you please," came the crisp, imperturbable voice of the law, suddenly. "This is a raid."

"Oh, no!" groaned Diana. "Nigel, what does it mean?"

"It means we're copped of course, old thing," Nigel said cheerfully. "We have to pay the piper and all that, unless we make a cut and run for it. Are you game?"

Because of the champagne Diana agreed, and followed Nigel in a quick dash through a wet garden to where he had left his car parked in a by-lane.

"Never use the official car park for this very reason," he laughed as they drove away unobserved. "Once bitten, twice shy."

"Oh, dear!" she groaned as they neared Southerton. "I've just remembered my coat. It's in the ladies' cloak-room at that place."

Nigel mouthed an oath.

"Any identification?" he demanded. "Of course," she said sharply. "It's my mink coat, remember. It has my name and address stitched on to the lining, telephone number—the lot."

"But nothing to identify you with me?" he asked speculatively.

She felt immediately chilled, disgusted.

"No, nothing," she said, "if that's the way you want it."

"Well, after all, I work here, old thing, and I've been fined twice for drinking after hours in that place already. Can you blame me for thinking of my own skin?"

She could, but she didn't, and determined to go round to the police station first thing in the morning, and put things as right as she could with the law. It wasn't only the coat, either. Now that she was herself again she couldn't imagine what had come over her to run away from trouble as she had done.

Diana duly presented herself at the police station in the morning and was

shown into an inner office where a police superintendent and a woman sergeant were working.

"Oh, yes, Doctor Taunton," the man greeted. "I rather thought you would show up. You want your coat, I presume?"

"Oh, yes, please, Superintendent. I also want to apologize," she said frankly. "Actually I didn't know what was involved at the time. I haven't been in a police raid before. I lead a somewhat innocent and workaday life on the whole."

"So we gathered from your husband," the super smiled grimly.

"My—my husband?" she stammered.

"Yes, Doctor Taunton. We rang up the address on the coat, thinkin', it might have been stolen to be so far from home, but your husband assured us you were staying in Southerton, and answered the description we gave him of you. He was a little surprised, to say the least. If you'll just sign for the coat, Doctor Taunton . . . ?"

She brought herself back with a jerk, and signed.

"You mean you—you aren't going to proceed against me?" she asked in surprise.

"That's right, Doctor," the super said kindly. "We had our man planted there last night, and I don't believe you realised that fiver you handed over was a bribe . . . ?"

"No, I didn't," she said hastily. "I thought it was to pay for the drinks."

"You can go, Mrs. Taunton. I somehow don't think we'll be seeing you again."

"Thank you, Superintendent. You're very kind."

She went out clutching her precious coat, feeling nauseated and faint.

"Daddy," she announced, after an uneasy lunch, "I'm going back home. Do you mind?"

"Not at all, Dinah. If you must, you must."

All morning she had expected the telephone to ring for her, but it hadn't. Now she wondered what Robert's reactions were to the knowledge he now possessed of her escapade. She felt she couldn't rest—not knowing.

Diana wondered at the air of cold disapproval which greeted her return to Devon Place, even before she saw Robert. It was as though everybody

was aware of her defection the previous evening, and yet she could not believe this was true. She had not been really surprised when Robert was not at the station to meet her: she knew only too well that this was his theatre day at St. John's, and that he would be far too busy to drop everything at her whim. But he had sent Tom Dawkes with the big car, and it was the first time Diana had seen the youth without a broad, beaming smile on his countenance.

"Is your mother well, Tom?" she had asked, to make conversation.

"Yes, Doctor. She's as well as yesterday day, when you went away."

"Of course," Diana smiled ruefully, "I seem to have been away ages."

Mrs. Dawkes too was extremely reserved, for her. She asked about the evening meal as though her mind and interest were elsewhere.

"Is anything wrong, Mrs. Dawkes?" Diana asked, as a silently disapproving Yvonne carried her bag upstairs without a word of greeting.

"Well, you should know if anything's wrong, madam, shouldn't you?" the widow demanded ambiguously, and swept into the kitchen as though afraid of having said too much already.

Diana shrugged and went on a tour of inspection of the house. Of course she had only left it a little over twenty-four hours ago, but it was becoming very dear to her and she now looked upon it unequivocally as home. She glanced into Liz's new "suite" to see how the decorators were progressing. The bedroom was almost finished and looked very nice indeed with its grey and pink regency-striped paper, and black and gold pelmets. Liz had chosen the colour scheme herself, and displayed quite good taste. Perhaps if she had had her way with the sitting-room and been allowed bright red walls with curtains of silver lame, it wouldn't have been as restful as the pale blue and oyster finally decided on. They would have great fun furnishing during the next few weeks, Diana decided, and it was really proving rather nice having a teen-age ward about the house.

Today she had reverted to her old nervousness of Robert, her husband. This was her guilt complex, of course, from last night. What story of her activities had he heard from the police? Had he perhaps requested *all* the details of her escapade,

She jumped when she heard him arrive at a little after six and his voice enquiring after her. But it was she who had eventually to seek him out. She ran him to earth in the study where he was glancing through the latest copy of the *Lancet*.

"Hello, Robert!" she greeted, hoping she did not sound as though she was gushing. "I—I'm back."

"So I see." His smile was cold.

She didn't understand him in this mood and played for time. Perhaps the significance of her behaviour the previous evening hadn't yet struck him.

"Father was well," she volunteered.

"Good! I'm glad you stayed long enough to find that out at least."

This was a deliberate sneer and she bridled immediately. "I came back early, because—because I wanted to explain about things," she told him. "I realised you would probably grab at the wrong end of the stick, as you apparently have done."

He began to laugh mirthlessly. "Women!" he exclaimed. "Their sticks are always two-handled: the end you should grab and the end you shouldn't. How you condone a breach of faith by using stupid metaphors, I can't imagine! You astound me, Diana. I once paid you the compliment of thinking you were intelligent."

"And now, suddenly, I'm an idiot, I suppose?" she asked him, breathing hard. "Well, I came back to face the music, but I didn't quite expect this! I didn't break faith, or at least intend to. The situation got a little out of hand, but I'm too dull a person by nature to pursue the path of gay abandonment for long. You may not believe this, but I went to the police and owned up myself."

Robert was staring at her uncomprehendingly.

"Forgive me if I don't know what you're talking about," he snapped. "But after this nothing will surprise me, Diana, I can tell you."

"After what?" she asked, as puzzled as he. "I think we'd better start our conversation afresh. Of what do I stand accused by you?"

"Of causing unnecessary pain and embarrassment to young Tom Dawkes by babbling about his childish troubles to Matron, that's what. She casually remarked to Tom that his lip had healed as perfectly as any she had seen, and the poor boy didn't even know he'd been

born with a disfigurement. Naturally he wanted to know, and I had to tell him. I could have wrung your neck when Matron, almost as distressed as he was, said you had mentioned it casually one day during a coffee break."

Diana put her hand up to her mouth.

"But I didn't—I couldn't have!" she denied, then wondered how else Matron could have found out. She had worked so hard these past weeks that possibly her tongue had wagged when she was too tired to be aware of it. But she had promised Mrs. Dawkes she would never betray her confidence. Hadn't she heard that even under hypnosis a person will not reveal information which is another's secret?

"I couldn't have," she said again, uneasily.

"But Matron says you did, Diana, and you must admit that she can't always be said to be in the wrong. Your private feud with Joan is one thing, but to suggest she would deliberately acquire information and use it against you is going a bit far, don't you think?"

"What must Mrs. Dawkes be thinking of me?" Diana asked in genuine distress. "I must see her immediately."

"How could I?" "When did I?" she asked herself all the way to the kitchen.

"Mrs. Dawkes," she said with true humility as that worthy questioned her appearance, "I really don't know what to say. I'm not a gossip. I don't remember telling Matron about Tom. You must believe me, though I'll understand if you feel you can't forgive me. Hearing of it like that, unprepared, must have been rotten for Tom, and I can just imagine how he accosted you on the subject when he came home. I've been racking my brains and I can only assume Matron and I were discussing a similar case to Tom's and I unknowingly brought his name into our conversation. This isn't an excuse, believe me, but there has to be an explanation for my own peace of mind. I wish I could undo the mischief. I really do."

Mrs. Dawkes had been softening throughout this speech. Now she said, more cheerfully, "Well, Tom knows now, and he's beginning to see how much we have to thank Doctor for. It might all be for the best, madam. Now you go and have your dinner and don't worry no more about it."

"I can't help worrying—" Diana paused in the kitchen doorway, and, as is sometimes the way, the familiarity

of her surroundings rang a bell in her remembrance. She had been leaving the kitchen in similar circumstances some months ago when she had thought she heard a sound in the passage outside. That had been the day Mrs. Dawkes had confided about Tom, and the sound had been blamed on the cat, which liked to sleep in the nearby conservatory. On that day Diana had come upon Joan Hayling in the sitting-room. Having been admitted to the house unbeknown to its mistress, she could easily have overheard the conversation in the kitchen. She must have done. But surely no woman could be so deliberately cruel as to use information acquired surreptitiously in such a blatant fashion?

Having no proof, Diana filed her suspicions and unanswered the summons of the dinner gong, still looking very thoughtful. Robert was silent as he stood stiffly till she was seated and then went the length of the table to his own place.

"I—tried to put things right with Mrs. Dawkes," she volunteered in a small voice. "I am truly sorry about the whole business."

"It's over and done with," he said with a shrug. "I think perhaps it's I who should apologize to you for presuming to criticize your behaviour. You demonstrate again and again that you place your personal freedom above my approval of your activities."

"That's untrue!" was torn from Diana. "I came home hot-foot to explain what happened last night and you weren't even interested. I think I, too, nurse certain misconceptions regarding our relationship. I'm not a mechanical doll to be wound up and dance according to plan. You might think of that sometimes, Robert. I don't know about you, but I'm an extremely human person and so, at times, weak. You've just driven me through my membership exams, and so honoured our contract. But you can't keep on driving me. If you fail to observe that I'm a woman, as well as a doctor, you can't blame me for—for looking elsewhere for such assurance."

She looked down at her soup plate, her spoon hovered, trembling over the clear liquid.

"I think perhaps, Diana, we entered into something bigger than we realised four months ago," he said softly. "We're in danger of learning to actively dislike

one another unless we can find some other medium of communication which is permissible between us. I agree that I may have overplayed my role of tutor, but I didn't want you to be disappointed on all counts."

"I wasn't complaining on any account, Robert," she said in surprise. "What gave you that idea?"

"I fancied you preferred the company of Hugh Redbarn. He went off for a few days' holiday at the same time you did."

"Oh!" Scarlet flooded her normally pale cheeks. "Robert! how could you?"

"Last night the police rang to ask if you were my wife as they had found your coat in some awful place . . ."

"That's right," nodded Diana. "I tried to tell you."

"They said you'd bolted for it, but they thought your companion was another doctor . . ."

So he *had* cared after all! He had probably worried about it half the night. She stood up to say, impulsively, "Robert, I wasn't with Hugh Redbarn. I don't know where he is and care less. I was with Nigel last evening. Please don't be angry, because there's a perfectly simple explanation. After all, I did rush back to tell you myself, didn't I? Please don't repulse me. Let me tell you how everything happened."

She went to bed that night with Robert's friendly kiss still warm upon her cheek and a greater hope for their future than she had dared indulge for some time. Surely he would allow her some respite from work and study so that they could further their knowledge of one another?

Joan Hayling, Matron of the Taunton Private Clinic near the thriving Midland town of Farlingham, was by no means enjoying the summer. She thought of herself, in secret, as a woman scorned, and the fury of hell was unleashed in her bosom accordingly. She liked men's admiration, nevertheless, and in her position as a young and good-looking senior nurse had invariably been accorded this by the numerous doctors with whom she was invariably in daily contact.

She was a woman who set the highest store by platonic relationships. She had enjoyed working with Robert Taunton, thinking him to be as happy sharing

a purely mental plane as she was herself.

His marriage had therefore come as a great shock to her, and as she had her own private doubts as to the normality of the marriage, she resented even more that Doctor Di should be asked to occupy a position she would have been happy to occupy herself.

She played skilfully for Diana to lose face with Robert, and fancied she had had several successes; but when the news came, after weeks of intolerable waiting, that Doctor Di could add the letters M.R.C.S. after her name, Robert behaved so childishly, hugging and kissing his wife in front of everybody, that they could well have been true lovers after all.

"Congratulations, my dear," Joan had to say, though the words almost choked her. "You've made Robert very proud."

"Indeed she has," said the Clinic Superintendent gaily. "We must celebrate. Have you anything in your cupboard, Joan?"

"Nothing grand enough for a Membership," Matron said with a cool little smile in Diana's direction, "only a poor quality sherry which used to suffice for our lesser triumphs. I'm afraid you'll have to leave your celebrating until you get home, Robert, and proceed on the morning round as though nothing untoward had happened."

"When may I have a word with you about a bed for Mr. Tiffin, Matron?" Diana asked formally as the other arranged her frilled cap prior to accompanying Robert on the round.

"Oh, I'm afraid you can't, Doctor," Miss Hayling said promptly. "You've got more than your ration of free beds already, and I'm sure we don't want to see poor Robert in the bankruptcy court, do we?"

Diana bit her lip but said no more. There were times when Matron held the trump cards, as now, and she obviously wasn't going to give a trick away.

Doctor Di was prepared to leave the economics of the clinic to those qualified to deal with them, and she was aware that you can't put a dozen patients on a ward built and equipped to accommodate eight. But, having often been required to squeeze extra patients into a public hospital ward, she saw no good reason why an extra bed should not be squeezed into the non-fee-paying ward at the clinic for a patient whom Robert

had passed on to her as being well within the scope of her newly acquired ability.

Mr. Tiffin had developed a horrid bulbous cyst on the side of his already ample nose. The growth had been tested for malignancy, but was proven non-malignant, much to everyone's relief. Naturally, Mr. Tiffin wanted the thing to be removed as soon as possible, as children were inclined, as is their wont, to point their sticky little fingers at Mr. Tiffin's swollen nose and laugh. Those who have never had any physical disability or oddity cannot understand how much mental suffering is involved; how the feeling of abnormality is a worse affliction at times than the actual complaint.

Mr. Tiffin, having been on the hospital waiting-list for many months, and in the meanwhile suffered a nervous breakdown, his doctor had recommended that George Tiffin be considered for admission as a non-fee-payer as soon as possible.

Naturally there was always a great demand for the "free" beds at the clinic; each specialist was allowed two, and at the moment there were two extra "free" cases in a side ward, both Robert's patients, and admitted in the first place, against Matron's wishes, on Diana's insistence.

Therefore she dare not "push her luck" regarding Mr. Tiffin, but, having seen him again that morning, she realised that his neuroses were entirely due to his disfigurement, and had promised she would urge his admittance as a top priority.

Hugh Redbarn, who had arrived to look in on his own patients, noticed her depression and asked: "What's biting you, my beautiful?"

"Oh, it's Matron. She won't let me admit my free patient. She makes me sick."

"Tut! tut!" smiled Hugh, slicking back his hair expertly. "Since we've had you two under one roof this place has been hell. Of course, personally, I'm a bit of a devil and like the atmosphere, but poor old Robert must writhe on occasions. Why don't you just tell hubby to admit the poor creature? After all, he's the Big Boss around here."

"I'm aware of that. But Matron would say, 'Well, to please you, Robert . . .' and do it like a shot. I don't want to give her the opportunity of belittling me yet again. Tiffin's my patient."



"I'm afraid you'll have to leave your celebrating until you get home."

Hugh draped himself against the white-painted wall of the consultants' room.

"There's nothing to stop me letting you have one of my beds, is there?" he asked with a faintly mocking smile. "No. But you haven't one available, Hugh, have you?"

"I have a discharge today. You can have the bed for a little *kick*, my sweet. No more. No less."

"You—you don't mean that," she said uncertainly, as he lowered over her, looking very much like the Lucifer he chose to think he resembled.

"I do, you know. If I were you I wouldn't mention this to Matron. Present Tiffin as a *fall accomplice*, in the bed, and then explain. My *kick*, please!"

Diana reached up and offered her lips as Matron arrived soft-footedly in the doorway, coughing, as though apologetically, for the interruption.

"Mr. Taunton's bag," she explained her presence, and stalked off, stiff and starched, back to the wards.

"Now what will dear Robbie be told about *that* little scene?" Hugh asked mischievously.

"I shouldn't have listened to you," Diana said impatiently. "I might have known—!"

"You've got your free bed, haven't you?" the other asked reasonably. "Get on to your patient, dear. Strike while the iron's hot. Since you've paid the price I insist you reap the benefit."

"I—I can't believe you're doing this for so little," Diana said suspiciously. "You'll want more in the long run than just a kiss."

"Now stop putting ideas in my head, sweet," Hugh chided. "Let's say I like being able to put you in the position of dotting dear Matron in the eye for a change. It all helps to make life interesting. Now I must go and see all these dear things who help to put the butter on my bread. Want to come with me?"

"I may as well."

After Hugh's visit, and still not believing her luck, Diana personally sent a notification to George Tiffin, advising him to present himself at the clinic by ten a.m. next morning.

Joan Hayling kept the scene she had witnessed in the consultants' room to herself, as it happened. Her heartbeat had quickened as she returned to the wards and gave Robert his bag, and her thoughts were charged with an electric excitement. She had no doubt—in fact Hugh Redbarn made it no secret—

that the neurologist admired Robert's wife; but until this morning she had been unaware that Diana returned his feelings. It seemed unholy, somehow, that anyone with the opportunity of loving Robert should choose to be unfaithful to him; but if the beginning of unfaithfulness was there, and it was nurtured and grew, then in time Robert would find out and free himself of the unhappy union, then all would be as it once had been and she—Joan—would be supreme again.

The fact that Joan was feeling rather cross with Robert by lunch-time, when he had swept his wife off to enjoy a celebration luncheon somewhere or other, made her smile the more warmly on the neurologist, who had returned to keep an eye on a patient of his who was on the seriously ill list.

Despite Hugh's deficiencies of character, on occasions, he was a hundred-per-cent doctor, and would sit up all night with a post-operative patient who had undergone severe surgery, rather than fret about the matter elsewhere.

"I think she's holding her own, Hugh," she now said comfortingly. "You poor thing! You need your lunch."

"I don't feel like going back to my hotel, or to a restaurant," he said moodily. "Can you rustle me up something from the kitchens?"

"There may be some chicken which hasn't gone through the mincer," she decided. "I'll phone down and see. It must be grim living in a hotel, Hugh. No privacy," she grimaced, as though they shared a secret.

"No, not much," he agreed, wondering at her interest. "I may go in for a flat one day if I don't go back eventually to Claire. I'm waiting for her to whistle."

"Oh, but I thought—I mean why should you think of going back to Claire if you're—er—attracted elsewhere, eh?"

For one awful moment Hugh thought Matron was making up to him, then he began to suspect she was "fishing" and agreed with her.

"As you say, Joan, why should I?"

"I suppose things are difficult for you, living in a hotel and everything. I—er—I have a sweet little country cottage about six miles away. Did you know?"

"No, I didn't," he said with polite interest,

She was growing dreadfully embarrassed by now, he noted.

"I'd let you have the key any time you wanted, you know, Hugh. You'd like my cottage. It's very secluded and stands in a pretty garden."

He almost laughed aloud as he realised the implication. She was giving him *carte blanche* to use her cottage. Poor innocent Joan! Didn't she realise one had only to sign the register at a hotel where one wasn't known . . .? Still, he remembered to thank her for the offer, and filed the information in case it was ever of any use to him.

"Then you're not thinking of specialising in plastic surgery?" Robert asked, somewhat curtly.

"I didn't say that," Diana returned. "I simply said I wasn't prepared to make my mind up in a hurry. Now that I've got my membership I think the wider the field the better. I suddenly feel ambitious. Anything wrong about that?"

"No, it's to be expected, I suppose. More champagne?"

"Yes, please. I must cheer myself up. You're disapproving of me and I refuse to be downcast by your disapproval."

"I don't disapprove. I simply want to know where I stand in this ambitious programme of yours. Such a short while ago you were my pupil; now, apparently, you regard yourself as—er—my equal."

She gasped and choked over her champagne glass.

"Robert Taunton! You—you snob! I realise I have you to thank for my success, but I worked too, you know."

"Who's saying—?"

"You're implying that the *dégree* doesn't make the surgeon. Well, I'll jolly well show you. I could get a job under Mr. Argyle any time, and any hospital would have me."

"Don't get excited," he warned, in that way which immediately excites the more. "You're free to take your talents wherever they'll bring you most honour."

She was hurt and angry, but only her anger was allowed to show.

"Don't worry, I'll leave the clinic when the time's ripe," she said slowly.

He now felt vaguely uneasy. This had started out as a celebration luncheon for an honour duly won and accorded, but the proud accolade had now changed into the wounding thrust. He knew he was initially to blame, for he was

jealous of Diana's freedom to specialise where she would. He had so wanted her to desire to continue to work with, alongside him; whereas she had insisted, to his surprise, on retaining a general rather than a particular interest in surgery.

"You may even write your thesis, on some aspect of neuro-surgery?" he suggested bleakly.

"What an excellent idea!" she agreed, with an enthusiasm as simulated as his. "I didn't do much neurology at St. John's. I suppose I could widen my knowledge there."

"And Hugh is an excellent teacher," Robert opined.

"So I've discovered," she agreed, lighting a cigarette for herself before he could reach his own lighter. "I'm lucky to have so many opportunities."

She had asked him to treat her as a woman rather than merely as a partner, and since the shock of that weekend when he had believed she had gone off with Hugh, he had tried to be the gallant without ever trespassing beyond the line where he would cease to be welcome. There had been times when she had allowed him to come close, moments when the urge to make love to her had been so overpowering as to be almost inescapable. But his self-control had always won in the end, and her apparent content served as a warning that if he had overstepped the mark he would have offended her beyond forgiveness.

How was he to know that at such times she was sighing: Oh, Robert, why don't you take me in your arms if you want to? Why must you be such a tower of strength and make me feel so weak? She would smile and take his goodnight kiss on the cheek while a growing hunger within her cried out for the dear imprisonment of his arms and the demands of his lips upon her own.

Thus, each aware of their own desires and frustrations, they were still unsure of the other, and the watchfulness, as now, was damning to their expectations of happiness.

"Well, thanks for the lunch, Robert," she managed to say brightly. "It's been very revealing."

"Good! Aylesbury duckling and revelations go quite well together, I believe."

He hoped she would smile with him so that he would know she had not taken him too seriously, but he fancied as she passed him that if he reached out he

would feel prickles, and he sighed as he followed her out to the car that he lacked Redbarn's facility to get on with women in the lighter pursuits of life.

Diana, too, was regretting Robert's apparent disability to be strong without being severe. At first she had thought he must be joking when she had refused his offer of a junior partnership with him at the clinic. As a junior partner she would be responsible only to him, and share the restorative surgery cases with him exclusively, thus becoming a specialist by an extremely short cut.

It would have appealed to many a young doctor, she knew, but she fancied Robert was making this offer as her husband rather than with any real belief in her ability to assist him.

She was a serious enough practitioner not to wish for short cuts; though she hadn't mentioned the subject until after Robert's sneer, she had grown interested in Hugh Redbarn's work during her sojourn at the clinic and did not want to close the door on neuro-surgery until she knew more about it. She hadn't really wanted to turn Robert's offer down flat and for all time, she had merely wanted to say that she would prefer to stay on at the clinic in her general capacity than specialise at the moment.

The coolness persisted between them all day, until, after an unhappy little dinner, he tried (or so she thought) to keep it up on this occasion.

"I didn't realise when I married you that you sulked, Diana," he suddenly accused. "How long do you intend to keep it up on this occasion?"

She almost choked over her coffee.

"You have a damned cheek!" she smouldered at him. "Of all the pots calling the kettle black . . .!"

He tried again.

"If you can take your mind from kitchen utensils for an instant and be relevant," he suggested, "we might talk some sense. Or at least converse intelligently as other couples manage to do."

"But we're not like other couples, are we?" she asked quickly. "What you really want for your companion, in your heart of hearts, is an echo. I suppose I'm a great disappointment in that respect." His eyes flashed suddenly. Her own fell as she choked a little, rose and said, "I'm tired, Robert, I'm going to bed."

In a moment he was round the table and barring her way, however.

"Oh, no, Diana. This is one occasion when we're talking something out to the bitter end. You've said some extremely hurtful things—"

He stopped speaking, for she was saying in the same breath, "You think you have *carte blanche* to hurt me whenever—" she, too, stopped in mid-sentence and regarded him watchfully.

"Why do we—hurt each other?" he asked helplessly.

"I—I don't know. I think you're a sort of mental sadist, Robert, who—"

"Hush!" He held her shoulders firmly. "There you go again!"

"And there *you* go—bullying me."

This time he shook her gently. "If you don't shut up, Di, I'll—"

"I won't be bullied into shutting up, so there! If I want to—"

She had to close stormy eyes because his face went out of focus as he kissed her. She felt his mouth, strong and masculine, effectually silencing her, and tears of impotent rage ran down her cheeks. As soon as she could draw breath she called him a few uncomplimentary names, and he didn't hesitate in clamping down on her again. He kept her thus imprisoned for a long time and when he finally released her she found herself hanging on to his lapels, feeling strangely lightheaded and malleable, like clay in the potter's hands. The third time he put a finger under her chin and they came together without a struggle, holding close and only easing their lips apart to stand cheek to cheek while each recovered breath.

"You see," Robert said at length, "we've both been doing far too much talking. Sometimes there are better ways of expressing oneself."

She pulled away from him and smoothed herself down. He wondered, as she went towards the door, if he had overstepped that line he imagined she always drew between them.

But no. In the doorway she turned and smiled with the tremulous happiness of a bride.

"You know, Robert, you once told me you were a slow starter in such things. I think, however, if you applied yourself, you'd make an extremely fast finisher."

He stood staring at the door which she had closed after her, his heart beating fast with excitement and delight.

The minx! The darling! If that was an invitation he was quite prepared to take it up here and now!

But when he succeeded in running her to earth in the overlarge house she was singing softly and happily in her bath, quite unaware that outside the door was a husband eager to petition his right to become a lover.

"I mustn't rush her," he decided, with the satisfaction of one who merely defers a great joy. "She doesn't hate me, that I know, now; and there's all the time in the world . . ."

But George Tiffin, gloomily watching television while a letter sped on its way to tell him to report at the clinic for his operation, and Matron Hayling, writing case history letters to her nursing friends in all parts of the world, were both to be instrumental in knocking the anticipated cup of joy clean out of Robert Taunton's hands.

CHAPTER SIX

JOAN HAYLING sat before the dressing-table mirror in her daintily furnished bedroom and anticipated the role ahead of her with some satisfaction. No one was to know that today was her thirty-first birthday; she was confident that she looked no more than twenty-seven. The flesh of her cheeks was firm, perhaps rather plump, and of the waxy pinkness that indicates the true Anglo-Saxon, and her fairish

hair was skilfully dressed to look at its best when worn with her lace-edged Matron's cap.

And how she loved bedecking herself in the garments of her authority! The lace on her cap was the finest Brussels, and her plain grey dress was exquisitely tailored with a small white lace-edged collar. She never, of course, wore an apron as she never did any real work. Supervising and housekeeping were

her duties. So far she had been extremely efficient and Robert had no fault to find with her, though the rest of the staff were inclined to think she could occasionally unbend and lend a hand when there was an emergency or some "flap" on.

She was preparing now for her morning round, and because she liked to be popular was deliberately delaying the start so that the staff could have everything ready for her gracious meanderings. On operating day the routine was inclined to be upset a little.

Finally, having pocketed a handkerchief sprinkled with eau-de-cologne, she picked up the house phone and dialled herself through to the McIndoe Wing.

"Sister Yates?" she enquired. "Matron here. I'm starting my round now."

"She's on her way," Sister Yates said pithily to her staff nurse. "Who's going to tell Lady T. she can't have a bedpan just now—you or me?"

"Oh, you, Sister," laughed the other, and made her escape.

Joan appeared regally at the end of the corridor to be met by Sister Yates and conducted into the various private rooms. In the first was a dear little man called Pringle, who had lost an eyelid owing to a woman's carelessness in putting up her umbrella while standing in a crowd. Pringle was now looking much better than when he had been admitted, and was so little trouble that the nursing staff would be almost sorry to lose him. He always sat bolt upright in bed during Matron's round, and answered her questions regarding his health so promptly and politely that she was not to know Mr. Pringle was in reality an author who wrote screamingly funny accounts of the most commonplace events, and that his clinical experiences were providing him with material which would keep his public laughing for years to come.

By now there was an absolute din of bells jangling in the corridor, and Staff Nurse Thomas was darting in and out whispering, "Matron's round!" and hoping Matron didn't see her.

"And how's my dear Lady Tarpling today?" Joan enquired, regarding the elderly dowager's chart as though it was an illuminated manuscript. Lady Tarpling, who was eighty-two and recovering from burns to both legs, hadn't much time for Matron, however.

She said firmly, "I want a bedpan now. I want it *now*."

Joan veered away from the subject as though it offended her and asked Sister, hastily, if her ladyship was eating well.

"I want it *now*," her ladyship said clearly, "or else—!"

"Good morning, Lady Tarpling," Joan simpered, and edged out, observing that it was extremely tiresome when patients showed no respect for "the round". Sister Yates quickly ushered her into the next room and contrived to inform Nurse Thomas, in mime, that her ladyship might now have her way.

From the McIndoe Wing Joan made her way to the neuro-surgical side, and then graced Mr. Argyle's private patients with her presence. These were all women, of course, some of them already pre-medicated for their expensive operations.

Lastly, and with a certain frigidity about her countenance, she visited the wards where the non-fee-paying patients were housed. There were two wards, containing four beds each, normally, though two extras could be accommodated if required. One extra bed was already spoiling the symmetry of the women's ward, according to Matron, and she frowned at the occupant, probably subconsciously, because Doctor Di had been responsible for her admission. She knew there had been a discharge in the men's ward yesterday, and that Mr. Redbarn should therefore have a bed available. She stared when she saw four beds with four occupants, however, and questioned the senior nurse in charge here.

"George Tiffin?" she referred to the chart at the foot of the third bed. "Surely this man is not Mr. Redbarn's patient, Nurse?"

"No, Matron. Doctor Taunton operated on him an hour ago. He will be ready for discharge by tomorrow, so the bed will again be available for Mr. Redbarn."

Joan's lips tightened into a thin line. She had a ridiculous desire to throw a childish tantrum here in the ward.

"Nurse, that is Mr. Redbarn's bed," she said sharply. "At any moment someone may be injured and need that bed. This man was not urgent. He could have waited. I won't have such things arranged behind my back!"

She stalked off. Robert was operating; so she shut herself in her apartments

and worked herself up in a fine state. As soon as the principal was available she rang him up and told him he would have her resignation, in writing, by the morning.

Diana looked in on George Tiffin just before lunch and found him sighing himself back into consciousness.

"Everything's all right, Mr. Tiffin," she said softly and encouragingly. "You'll be sitting up and having your tea quite happily later on today."

"Thanks, Doctor," the man mumbled gratefully.

Nurse Mitten, who genuinely liked Doctor Di, was waiting by the door looking troubled, however.

"I think I ought to tell you, Doctor," she said nervously, "that Matron was most upset at seeing Mr. Tiffin in that bed."

Di actually laughed.

"Really?" she asked. "But Mr. Redbarn offered it to me. It will only be occupied the one night."

"I know that, Doctor, but still . . . I hope you won't think me impertinent to mention it."

"You mean I should be on the *qui vive* for trouble, eh, Nurse? Well, thanks, and I will."

When she was eventually summoned to Robert's presence however, and saw Matron sitting stiffly, her breast rising and falling in agitation, Diana realised that Nurse Mitten's warning had foundation in fact.

"You sent for me, Robert?" she asked, trying to assess his own mood from his darkling countenance. "If it's about George Tiffin, Mr. Redbarn offered me the bed and I gladly accepted it. My patient should be due for discharge tomorrow."

"How was it this man's admission didn't go through the records office?" Robert asked with a deadly calm.

"Because there wasn't time," Diana explained. "I had the bed offered, the patient waiting, I acted on my own initiative and now the whole business is over and done with."

"Not quite," Robert said sharply. "This is an institution where everybody serves in his or her own capacity. Matron confirms all admissions and our secretary deals with all the correspondence. This business between you and Redbarn savours of a private plot against the normal routine of the clinic. Would you mind telling me if you agree, Diana?"

She looked from one to another of the other occupants of the room and then tossed her head defiantly.

"Very well," she admitted, "call it a plot if you like, Robert. It was the only way I could get my patient into the clinic to catch today's theatre, and I thought it too good an opportunity to miss."

His face might have been carved from stone as he regarded her.

"So you admit flouting Matron's authority?" he enquired.

"I suppose I didn't think about it, or if I did, to be quite honest, I knew Matron would forbid Tiffin's admission."

Joan caught her breath sharply and then said in a thin, high voice, "You see how it is? How it would be from now on?"

Robert was tapping with a pencil on his desk.

"Matron has given notice," he said suddenly. "Obviously if she has no real authority here one can't blame her."

"Well, I'm sorry if my action in admitting my patient brought this about. My concern for him overruled everything else, I'm afraid. I certainly never foresaw an issue like this being made out of it, and I hope Matron will accept my humble apologies and reconsider."

Robert looked tiredly towards the other woman.

"Well, Matron?"

"No," she said crisply. "I've never been so humiliated before in my whole career, and a mere apology is not enough. If I don't leave the clinic, Doctor Taunton, you must."

Diana looked aghast, and Robert's hand clenched the arm of his swivel-chair as though he, too, had suffered a shock.

"You can't mean that, Joan," he said less formally. "Let's all have lunch and calm down a bit."

"I'm quite calm, thank you," Matron pressed on, "and of course I realise you must take your wife's part in all this, Robert, and so I'm prepared to leave at the weekend. Sister Linton will be able to carry on temporarily in my place. Mrs. Taunton and I have had too many differences of opinion, of one sort and another, as it is."

"No, no, I won't accept your resignation, Joan," Robert said worriedly. "There must be another way out—"

Diana held herself very erect suddenly.

"There is," she said bluntly. "You can accept mine, Robert."

"Please don't complicate things, Diana," he begged. "That's not being very helpful."

"I think it is. Matron is apparently more needed here than I am, seeing that you didn't accept her resignation when she made it an issue between herself and me. Well, I'm not prepared to be tolerated by her when I consider I've done no real wrong. Had she been a little less concerned with the differences of opinion she says we have, I wouldn't have hesitated to ask her to do openly what I did in secret. Now please excuse me, I have another job to look for."

Robert rose as the door slammed. He looked as though he was about to charge out into the corridor before thinking better of it and sitting down again.

"Well, Joan," he asked, "are you satisfied?"

"You mean you're going to allow your wife to leave?" Matron asked. "Personally I think I should be the one to go."

"The final decision must be yours, of course," he said dismissively. "My wife is a woman of strong character, Matron, and I should think she is by now as determined to leave us as you were to get rid of her."

Leaving her staring uncomprehendingly after him, he made his excuses and quickly swept from the room.

"Why ever did I think a normal man-woman relationship could come of this affair?" Diana asked herself bleakly after she reached Devon Place that evening. "Robert's not even human. He's an efficiency machine. After—after last evening I could have sworn he would have called that great baby's bluff and accepted her resignation, if only out of loyalty to me. But no, he can't see that she has no intention of throwing up a job the like of which she'll never see again. He had the audacity to ask me not to complicate matters, after she had insulted me as she did!"

Still breathing fire, she went grimly to answer the telephone, only to find it was Hugh Redbarn, highly delighted by all accounts of the day's events.

"Rumour has it that you're leaving our select little band at the clinic," he queried. "Surely this can't be true?"

"It very likely will be," she answered shortly. "You, I suppose, suspected

the repercussions following your bed-lending offer?"

"Honestly, sweetheart," he laughed, "the whole thing has blown up beyond even my wildest dreams. Does this also mean you'll be leaving Robert, I hope?"

"That's none of your business, Mr. Redbarn."

"*Touche!* But what is my business is the fact that my houseman's job is vacant at St. John's. If I thought you were interested I'd recommend you for interview by the Board."

"I'm interested," Diana said, before she could even think. "Just so long as you understand, Hugh, that our association begins and ends with work."

"Now is that quite nice? I have only your interests at heart, my dear."

Hearing Robert unlatch the front door, Diana hastily replaced the receiver and swept away.

He ran her to earth eventually in Liz's new bedroom, which was to be occupied that weekend for the first time.

"I've got to talk to you, Diana," he said firmly, slamming the door shut and locking it for good measure. "The sooner you blow off your steam the better, I think."

Her lip curled as she paced about the delightfully decorated room.

"You simply can't see how that woman twists you round her finger, Robert. It's not merely pathetic, it's nauseating."

"Nobody twists me any way I don't want to go, Diana," he said calmly. "I'm fully aware of the various neuroses affecting the women in my life. You're not without one or two yourself, you know; and I try to go along with them as far as is right and proper."

Her eyes seemed to flash fire.

"Is it right to take another's part against your wife, then? I know I would take yours against anybody, at any time, even though I knew you were wrong!"

He actually smiled a little at this.

"Would you, Diana? That's very nice to know. It also draws the line between emotional and illogical woman and rational man. I assure you that, touched as I would be by your loyalty in such an eventuality, I would prefer my error to be publicly pointed out rather than have you apparently upholding it. I don't want to air platitudes, but two wrongs will never make a right."

Diana looked desperately out of the window. How could one keep up an angry tirade against someone so deliberately in command of every situation in which he found himself?

"Why did you lock the door?" she asked in a low voice.

"Because I don't want to stalk you through the house from room to room. Women are inclined to relish situations where they are the hunted. I prefer my domestic staff to remain in ignorance of this present business."

"Very well," she rounded on him, "I'm your prisoner. What am I supposed to say or do to be allowed my freedom again?"

"You're supposed to stop acting the injured party and see reason, that's all. I'm sure you know what's reasonable without any prompting from me?"

"I know what you think I ought to believe reasonable, that a jumped-up nursing sister can give me—a qualified doctor—notice. Well, I don't see it, and never will." She sat down heavily on the bed.

"If only you had allowed Joan to play her absurd role as a solo," he suggested, "instead of making it a duet, we might have got somewhere."

She pondered his words for the moment.

"I don't think I know what you mean," she snapped at length.

"Well, I'll try to explain. Firstly, I happen to know and understand Joan Hayling very well. I know what the clinic and her job mean to her. I also know the thorn in the side *you* have been to her even when at your most innocent."

Diana actually turned round to regard him.

"I'm no fool, Diana," he insisted, "and you must never think of me as such because I appear to don the motley on occasions. Joan resents your presence at the clinic, but I don't allow Joan to sway clinical policy or appoint my medical staff. The nursing side is her pigeon, *you* are my business."

"But she—she stood there saying it was either her or me, and you simply swivelled in your chair and said she couldn't really mean it, and let's all go to lunch, or something like that."

"That's what I said, let's go to lunch and calm down. I needed to calm down. For once her audacity had succeeded in rattling me."

"You mean because she had asked *me* to leave?"

"Of course. At that moment she was painfully out of her text. She was as nearly out of a job as she'll ever be."

"Oh, Robert, I—I didn't know your mind was working on those lines. I felt humiliated and deserted."

"It would have been as well if you had continued to hold your tongue, Diana. As it was you promptly made a difficult situation worse. In the beginning, you see, you were very much in the wrong, and I couldn't defend your action. You knew the balloon would go up, and it did. Now I want to know, please, if you will continue to work at the clinic as before. If you do, I've decided that Joan must go. She made this ridiculous stipulation in the first place, and I will, naturally, hold her to it."

Diana began to pace again.

"You've made me see things differently, Robert," she said humbly, "and I'm sorry for my part in this horrid business. Actually, I don't think I could ever work as happily knowing it had cost Joan her job, and the two of us together are obviously too much for the peace of the place. I'll get another job."

"Do you want to leave me altogether, Diana?" he asked calmly.

Suddenly, with cheeks flooding scarlet, she remembered the way he had bent her to his will last evening in such a different way, such a delightful, promising way. Now he had done it again and she realised she rather enjoyed being mastered in this wholly masculine way. Did he really expect her to accept the freedom he so casually offered? Perhaps she would never really understand him, and thus keep in his thrall.

"Not unless you want me to, Robert," she answered him. "I can get work locally. I've actually had an offer."

She didn't enlarge on this and, to her annoyance, he didn't enquire further.

"Very well." He unlocked the door with a flourish. "You can leave this room, Diana, on payment of a kiss."

He struck an attitude and half smiled at her. She knew this was his way of making up, and would have paid the forfeit he asked willingly, even eagerly, had it not been that she remembered Hugh Redbarn making a similar bargain with her.

"One kiss, my sweet, and the bed is yours."

Oh, damn Hugh and his mischievous plotting which had brought this day's business about!

She hesitated over-long.

"You don't have to force yourself," Robert shrugged, and was gone, leaving her regretful, intrigued, half annoyed and painfully in love with him.

Yes, she told herself, she was in love with Robert Taunton in a deeply involved way which would take a lot of satisfying; and because man's love was said to be of man's life a thing apart, she doubted he had got around to regarding her as more than an annoyance which could be moulded into a delight at over-long intervals. Hardly worth the trouble, in fact. He had not even bothered to ask twice for his kiss.

"Oh, where is all this going to end?" Di asked herself sharply, as she prepared to go downstairs and take command of her housewifely duties at least.

Liz lay on the sheepskin rug near the open french windows leading out into the garden, regarding her guardians dubiously and then decided to make her big concession.

"You know, you two," she said confidentially, "I think you've both been jolly decent about me, on the whole. It isn't as if I'm your child, and yet, I swear, I can't tell the difference."

"Of course you're 'our child,'" Robert said promptly, "and you can't tell the difference because there isn't any."

"Well, you needn't go snubbing me, Uncle Rob, when I'm trying to express my gratitude. I want to say thank you in my own way for my lovely new rooms, especially to Di, because, after all, they were her idea."

"But your uncle footed the bills," Diana interjected, with a little smile. She was darning. Liz had brought home her sky-blue nylon-stretch "rounders" socks, and the fine needlework involved was rather beyond Mrs. Dawkes' ideas of mending.

"It takes a woman to know what another woman wants," Liz went on profoundly. "I think Di has always understood me, and I like to think I understand her, perhaps more than you do, Uncle Rob."

Rob and Diana exchanged quick glances. What, they wondered, was coming next?

"I've been thinking," Liz went on,

"and it's selfish of me to mind you starting a family . . ."

Diana unaccountably pricked herself and the blood stained the blue over the darning . . . "Of course, when I was friends with Cherith," Liz proceeded, "she rather put me off babies and—and all that. But now I'm older and wiser; I realise we all have to be born, and—and love and everything must be all right or it wouldn't be so popular. So—so go ahead, whenever you like, both of you."

"Doing what?" Robert asked dubiously.

"Having a baby, of course," Liz sat up to say frankly. "You're good enough to treat me as your own child, but I don't want to be an *only* child. I think a baby would be fun, and I want to know about it from the very beginning, Di. You hear?"

"So that you can regale your school friends?" Diana asked rather bleakly.

"My dear Di!" Liz said reprovingly. "Your generation may have discussed such things furtively, but mine is above that sort of thing. We're advanced."

Robert hid a smile behind the lighting of his pipe.

"A little too advanced for your own good, I think," Diana retorted promptly. "Having babies isn't just a question of biology like the birds and the bees; there are human emotions involved about which you, as yet, know absolutely nothing. Married people don't suddenly say 'Let's have a baby', much as they would say, 'Let's have an egg for tea'. A baby is born out of fusion of many elements, and, believe me, a baby would simply be an inconvenience to your uncle and me at this particular time."

Robert was regarding her approvingly, trying to convey that she had carried the whole thing off rather well.

Liz sighed softly.

"Well, don't leave it too long," she concluded. "Once I start with boy friends I'll be too busy to push the pram for you, and then you'll realise what a help I would have been at such a time."

Being Hugh Redbarn's houseman at St. John's was not at all a bad job; in fact Diana had already admitted to being more than a little interested in neuro-surgery; but by the time she had been specialising for a little over a month, she realised that her first love

was still plastic surgery, which was Robert's line.

She found herself envying the gangling young fellow who was Robert's houseman, and often spoke to him about the operations at which he had assisted.

"But surely you discuss all this with your husband, Doctor Taunton?" he once asked her. "I assure you he knows far more about it than I'm beginning to think I ever will."

"Cheer up!" she smiled back. "You've got a teacher who will bring you up to scratch by hook or by crook. I know"—she smiled ruefully—"I've had some. But it did get me my membership in the end."

"Yes," Doctor Yardley pondered, "you are rather heavily diplomaed for a houseman, aren't you? You could be holding down a much more highly salaried post."

"I suppose so," she shrugged, "but as I'm a married woman so much more would go to the income tax man. Also, this job enables me to get home out of duty hours. Not always conveniently but one can't have everything . . ."

Her off-duty did not fit in nearly so conveniently at Devon Place as when she had worked at the clinic, and she suspected Robert was none too pleased about it. For one thing, as a houseman she was required to work every other Sunday, and this meant she saw far less of Liz. Also she was occasionally on night call, and when the telephone shrilled in the small hours for her, it was sure to be during a night when Robert was enjoying some well-earned sleep, and she would hear his light go on and his voice saying something unprintable as he looked at the time.

Still, he never actually complained, though she was aware of a decided chilliness in a relationship which had once shown promise of torrid possibilities.

Then there were holidays. Liz was suddenly released with the prospect of eight glorious weeks of freedom ahead of her, two of which she had managed to dispose of in advance by arranging to stay with a friend who, conveniently, was domiciled in Southport. This meant that friend Delia would be returning to Devon Place for a further two weeks. Naturally Liz then looked to her elders to help her dispose of the remaining month.

"Uncle Rob," she accosted her

guardian one evening, "it's absolutely loony that Di can't have a holiday this year! She doesn't have to work, does she? It makes you appear *mean*. Tell her she *has* to come with us up to Pitlochry. Tell her!"

Robert looked coolly over the girl's head.

"I've no intention of forcing decisions upon Diana," he said. "She's the most professionally ambitious person I know. Her work means more to her, I believe, than mine does to me."

Diana met those challenging eyes and was stirred to retort:

"You know why I took this houseman's job, Robert, and why I must bow to the discipline of it. It's just unfortunate . . ."

"Come up for your long weekend," urged Liz, sensing dissension between these two and not feeling too happy about it.

"We-ell . . ." Diana waited for the invitation to come from Robert's lips, but a demon made him keep silence. "I don't play golf, or anything," she shrugged lamely.

The maid announced that Mr. Red-barn had called to see Doctor Di.

"I—I'll see him in the study, Yvonne," Diana said quickly, and excused herself. She was well aware that Robert disapproved Hugh's constant calls at Devon Place. He never actually said so, but she was as responsive to his moods, by now, as mercury is to heat.

"Hugh," she now accosted the caller, "why couldn't you have telephoned? I've told you before—this is my home."

"Sorry, sweet," he said with his usual easy charm, "but I rather wanted a natter in person," and you're so understanding."

The door stood open, and Liz, who was as normally inquisitive as most teenagers, saw Cherith's father stoop and salute her uncle's wife as though it was an everyday occurrence.

Funny how she never saw Uncle Rob kiss Di! Her heart felt chilled as she saw that man seize Diana's hands and hold them as he bent in intimate conversation.

They weren't talking about a case, she knew. Diana would return and say something had cropped up at the hospital, and maybe get ready to go out to work. But today it would be a lie, as maybe the other times had been lies, and perhaps Uncle Rob knew,

which was why there was this feeling of mistrust about the house nowadays.

Wandering back to the drawing room, she said suddenly, "Uncle Rob, don't you like Di any more?"

"Like her?" he was startled by the question and his smile was strained. "Why shouldn't I like her?"

"That's an answer, I suppose?" Liz demanded. "Now look here, Uncle Rob, I'm not asking you if you like cheese. We're discussing your wife. If you don't give her the attention she needs as a beautiful and attractive woman, then you can't wonder that someone else will—can you?" she finished rather lamely as he gave her that typically unnerving forthright stare of his.

"Just exactly what are you talking about, child?" he demanded in a cold, avuncular tone she fancied denied her developing awareness of the adult world.

"I'm talking about *them*, in there, that's what!" she retorted angrily. "He was kissing her just now. And if you don't care about such things, I do. I suppose I'm just old-fashioned that way."

Diana had swiftly thrust Hugh Redbarn away and released her hands, but further she did not repulse him, for he was a happy man and over-exuberant owing to the source of his happiness.

"I'm so glad for you, Hugh," she said sincerely. "I think there's no finer love story than that of a man and wife coming together again after a period of separation. Obviously you could both have leaned elsewhere, but the instinct to keep clear of other hazards and then link up once more seems to prove you were right in the first place about one another, doesn't it?"

"Couldn't have put it better myself," he granted, and rubbed his hands together. "My wife's a most attractive woman, you know, Diana. She's"—he narrowed his eyes—"a bit like you. Prettier."

Diana laughed without rancour.

"And I also have an offspring; female, species otherwise unknown."

"I know," Diana smiled ruefully. "I've met her."

"Has Cherith been here?" he queried, and shrugged. "She will possibly disapprove of any reconciliation between her mama and me, so I propose

to woo my wife by stealth behind her back. She little knows that when Claire announces she is going into the country for the weekend, she will actually travel a mere six miles and be with me."

Diana simply raised an expressive eyebrow.

"Now don't think too badly of me, dear," Hugh went on blithely. "Our country snugger had two bedrooms and both will be occupied; but we will at least be on our own for a bit, and the rest is up to me."

"You've bought a cottage?" Diana innocently enquired.

"No. As a matter of fact a friend offered me her key for—for private business such as this."

"Well, good luck, Hugh, and I must go now," Diana explained. "I'm on call tonight and have to get to the hospital. You didn't want to see Robert, did you?"

"No. I saw him earlier today. Don't tell him about—you know what. He hasn't any faith in me outside of my professional activities."

Diana went back to the drawing-room wearing a secret smile, and was promptly aware of "atmosphere" which had not been there fifteen minutes ago. Liz was not to be seen.

"I want to talk to you seriously," Robert said without preamble. "Do you think I might be allowed into my study?"

Feeling faintly rattled, Diana preceeded him into that room and pointedly shut the door.

"Was it wrong of me to see Hugh in here?" she asked. "You must make such things quite clear in future, Robert. I have to be allowed to see my boss somewhere."

"Was it as your boss, then, that he came?"

"No, not exactly."

Robert's eyes flashed.

"Look here, what is this third degree?" she demanded. "You've been spoiling for a row for some time now. I cleared out of your clinic and that seems to be wrong. I accept a junior position at St. John's so that I can live here, and that too is wrong, it would appear. I'm not due for leave and Liz objects . . ." she ran a hand over her brow . . . "I honestly don't know whose life I'm leading lately."

Robert had, as usual, kept calm and watchful during this tirade.

"One assumes that you're finally disillusioned in our—er—arrangement?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, well—" she answered, knowing she was on extremely dangerous ground—"it's not much of a life, is it? I'm neither fish nor fowl—one thing or the other."

"But you understood from the very beginning—"

"I don't think I really did understand," she flared. "I only thought I did. I'm not professionally ambitious as you make me out to be. I work hard, and study, because I'm frustrated, I suppose."

"You prefer the embraces of a man's arms to that of your career?"

"Is that so wrong—at my age?"

"Not at all," he assured her with a light laugh, "but you can't expect to indulge your amours in *my* house, in *my* study, while *my* niece looks on. Make your assignations, in future, elsewhere."

Diana was so dumbstruck by this that he had left the room and was half-way down the garden before she came to. Then she was a dynamo of human energy in hot pursuit. Placing herself squarely in his path, she asked, "Did you mean that insult you just offered me?"

"Yes, I think I did. I'm getting rather tired of being presumed a blind-mute where my wife's amorous adventures are concerned."

"I have a reputation, then, for these?"

"Unfortunately you chose to join up with a liberally tarred brush. Redbarn's predilection for your company was always something of a joke at the clinic. Also you have been seen in his arms by three different people, two of whom are Liz and myself. One can always disbelieve the odd outsider, but you had the audacity to bring this thing home, Diana." He shook his head sombrely. "Grant me normal intelligence, at least, and a powerful sense of smell."

"You couldn't all be wrong, I suppose?" Diana asked in a high-pitched voice which could so easily turn to tears. She made an attempt at controlling herself. "I—I want to leave you, Robert."

"I was beginning to take a hint, Diana. I thought that would come."

"Actually you don't really need me here, even in my original capacity. Your staff seem settled and well able

to cope with Liz's needs. And if she thinks less of me than she did, it's as well that I go before she actually grows to despise me, as you obviously do."

"Liz blames me, as a matter of fact. She thinks I'm far too undemonstrative to hold you as a—a 'beautiful and attractive woman', I think she said."

Diana actually managed a crisp smile.

"How very observant Liz is!" she exclaimed. "I hope she'll be a happy wife one day and not imagine marriage can work as an 'arrangement'. I'm going to work now, Robert, and I'll stay away. I'll call and collect the rest of my things when you're in the highlands with Liz, if I may."

"Of course you may. I also hope, though I doubt it, that you'll be happy with him."

"Very generous of you," Diana choked, and, unable to continue such a desolating conversation, stalked away from him and into the house.

Robert Taunton was proud, jealous and lonely to the point of bereavement after Diana's precipitate departure from Devon Place. One moment she was there and he was almost hating the sight of her; and the next she was gone, and he was missing her more than he had imagined or could describe even to himself. How could it be possible to mourn someone who had let you down so badly and repeatedly; who hadn't even bothered to deny her preference for the company of another, even though one wouldn't have believed such a denial in the face of facts? Unless it was that this lonely ache was for the loss of someone beloved; and love does not always select the chaste or pristine. Love is content to love for love's sake.

"But one-sided love is hell, I've proved it!" he told his tormented self. "I gave her more and more rope and she simply went further and further away. I must forget her for Liz's sake."

Liz had been a nuisance on the subject of this separation, too, and harried him about it.

"You let her go, a girl like Di?" she asked disbelievingly. "Why, you—you wet fish, Uncle Rob. You should have knocked Hugh Redbarn's head off and made her respect you. Women like that sort of thing. It's not too late, even now. Knock his head off tomorrow at the clinic and drag Diana

back here. After all, she still *is* your wife."

But "tomorrow at the clinic" all was so obviously well with Redbarn's world. He addressed all the nursing staff as either "sweet" or "angel" and Matron, in particular, as "beautiful", which did not appear to displease her.

"How can they tolerate such a pantaloons?" Robert asked himself viciously, and asked someone else, Matron herself, when the opportunity arose a little later.

"Oh, Hugh has an easy charm," she assured him. "Women *en masse* fall for it and it amuses them. He doesn't seek to be respected, being earthy by nature, but *you*—", her wide "big sister" eyes assured him his was much the better role—"you are both loved and respected by some people, Robert."

He gave a sound resembling a snort.

"But it's true, Robert," she insisted, looking like a nun repeating her vows. She didn't realise how her set poses now sickened him. "I could never give my heart to a man like Hugh."

"Or anyone," he openly sneered. "All this talk of giving hearts is utter nonsense. The human heart is a purely physical functional organ like the liver or the kidneys. Imagine saying 'I could never give my kidneys to a man like Hugh', then you'll realise the idiocy of it all, Joan."

"You're cross," she complained, "and not at all your dear self, Robert. Something has happened to upset you at home and it has to be taken out on poor me."

She was so near to the truth that he looked at her, wondering if he should have the grace to feel ashamed.

"What could have happened at home?" he demanded, not prepared to give in as yet.

"A row with your wife, of course," she retorted promptly. "I always know when you've had a flare-up. You see, I'm sympathetically attuned to you, whether you care to believe it or not."

He was not to know, of course, that Hugh Redbarn had dug her in the ribs and reminded her of a promise to lend the keys of a certain country cottage for that weekend.

"The lady of your choice?" she had asked wickedly.

"Yes, beautiful. I'll be a happy man, I hope, come Monday."

She had handed over the keys, pre-occupied thereafter that she was aiding the devil and trying to justify herself

in her tidy little mind with being an accessory before the fact.

"Will Diana be home this weekend?" she now asked.

"Why?" Robert demanded.

"Because I—er—thought I might call and see her. It's been a long time."

"You didn't want to see her not so very long ago, when she left this place. I don't imagine she would be happy to see you, Joan, and no, she will not be home."

The other almost wept in her chagrin. Everything was working out well in other ways, but he simply tried to drive her away from him when she would have come closer, and was becoming very plain-spoken indeed.

"Very well, Robert," she said offendedly, and left him to his obviously ill humour. "He needs his holiday," she told herself as she sailed down the corridor, "and after the separation he'll need *me*."

Diana had taken a room at a rather shabby little hotel not too far from St. John's for her own convenience.

She had not seen fit to inform the hospital of her change of address, or to tell Robert where she was staying, either. Obviously he would send her man on to the hospital, and if anybody was curious on this point they could draw their own conclusions. She only knew she was tired and extremely disillusioned on the subject of the "marriage in name only", and wondered by what right Robert thought he could offend and criticise her, when his own behaviour had suddenly become anything but husbandly and attentive after her departure from the clinic.

Robert had apparently made up his mind that she was all but a scarlet woman, and it was unfortunate that Liz had witnessed what was simply a kiss of sheer gratitude, on Hugh's part, between them. Mrs. Redbarn, who kept her finger on the pulse of her ex-husband's affairs with an interest which would have flattered him, had he been aware of it, had summoned the new houseman to luncheon, *tete-a-tete*, one day. She, too, suspected more than a partnership where any attractive young woman was concerned. Not only did Diana promptly disillusion her, but declared that for divorced people they were remarkably inquisitive one about the other, and couldn't something rather wonderful come about if they

really were genuinely interested? So had the ball been set in motion which had resulted in Hugh's procuring the keys to Joan Hayling's cottage, and sent him so joyously about his business at the clinic that Robert, jealous and furious at one and the same time, nursed his misunderstanding like a viper in his bosom and felt almost ill with his misery at times.

The golfing holiday he had planned up at Pitlochry suddenly became a welcome escape from all that was going on nearer home. He towed Liz up north like an unwelcome burr, for she too now gave him no peace. She queried his decisions, questioned his sanity, babbled at length on virtues in Diana he had never even suspected, dressed ridiculously and blazed at his criticisms with comments like, "You don't know anything about women or women's clothes, Uncle Rob! I'm growing up and my blouse is *not* too revealing!"

When a twenty-five-year-old American was seen to kiss Liz's hand while she was wearing the dubious blouse, however, Robert hauled her off without preamble for a very serious heart-to-heart talk on the facts of life.

"Liz," he said miserably, "I don't know how to say this, but—"

The budding woman in the young girl responded immediately to his need, and threw her arms around his neck.

"Don't say it, Uncle Rob," she crooned softly. "There's no need to. It was all a put-up job between Gary and me. You don't have to worry."

"What are you saying, child?" he asked grimly.

"I arranged with Gary to make love to me, while I was dressed in this, so that you'd have a fit and realise that I could soon get out of hand without Di to keep an eye on me. We both need her. You as much as I do. I've *got* to make you see it, darling . . ."

He looked out beyond her towards the links where he hadn't yet dreamed of disporting himself.

"Liz, please don't add to my troubles," he begged warily. "I've got enough on my shoulders. You don't seem to realise that there's more than a possibility Diana doesn't need *us*."

"But you really do love her, don't you?" Liz persisted, and as he ignored the question, "Tell me, Uncle Rob. I'm old enough to understand about that."

He finally told her the whole story,

how it had never been a real marriage but a domestic arrangement convenient to them both, entered upon with her—Liz's—welfare at heart.

"Well! I like that!" Liz decided wonderingly, and became extremely thoughtful for the next five minutes.

"I did, as you guessed, fall in love with Diana," he proceeded, "and I did care to hope at one time that she was softening a little towards me. But—"

"I'm still a fact," Liz suddenly said cheekily. "If I was the original reason for this—this marriage, I consider you've both let me down by deciding on a separation before I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"You precipitated the whole business by looking in on that love scene in the study," he said nastily. "I happened to tell Diana she could do that sort of thing elsewhere in future."

"You told her *what*?" Liz asked, in horrified tones. "Oh, Uncle Rob, you shouldn't have! In the first place I only told you to stir you up to do a bit of kissing for yourself; and in the second place I don't like Di to think I blab; and in the third place it was him doing the kissing, not her, and she might not even have liked it. I think you've acted on a jealous impulse, *mon oncle*, and somebody's going to have to do something about it!"

In his agitation Robert Taunton almost hurled the telephone receiver against the wall. He was in conversation with a clerk at St. John's Hospital, a young woman who had just informed him that Doctor Taunton was not on duty but had left for home.

"And where's home?" Robert demanded.

"Pardon, sir?" came the girl's voice after a pause. "Surely that would be Devon Place, sir. Your house."

"Thank you." Robert shakily replaced the receiver, scarcely giving a thought to the fact that the girl must think he had gone mad. His only coherent thought was that he must find Diana, and obviously he was going to have to climb down and consult Redbarn as to her whereabouts.

Hugh's voice came confidently over the wires from his hotel.

"Yes, darling?"

"Taunton here," Robert snapped. "I want to know where my wife is, please."

"Why?" Hugh enquired mildly. "Is she lost?"

Robert controlled himself with an effort.

"Now look here, Redbarn, I'm not in any mood for your humour. I've got to get in touch with Diana urgently. She isn't at the hospital and I thought you might be able to help. Do you know where she is at the moment?"

Hugh mumbled. "At six o'clock? I should think she's in her bath or similarly occupied. I'm just getting into mine. Surely you know her domestic pursuits better than I do, Taunton?" Robert gripped the receiver until his knuckles showed white. "Possibly she told you she was dining with me at eight," Hugh went on, shortly, "but until then I simply haven't a clue, old boy."

"She's dining with you at eight?" Robert repeated. "Where?"

"Well—" Hugh hesitated only because he wondered if the Director of the Taunton Clinic knew of the existence of Matron's little hideaway, which he had been making use of for a few weekends as invited—"I can tell her when I see her that you want her stat. O.K.?"

"I would much rather see her and tell her for myself, Redbarn, thank you."

"All right. You'll be welcome if your mood improves—"

"What did you say?"

"Here's the address," Hugh said, as rattled now as his colleague. "Holly Cottage, Shepherd's Lane, Derring. Got it?"

"Thanks," Robert snapped, replacing the receiver and looking down at the address on the memo pad. Until eight o'clock there was obviously nothing to be done and he must contain his impatience and his anxiety. Reaching into his pocket, he brought out the sheet of note-paper which was causing the present disorganisation of his affairs. Written in a round, school-girlish hand were the words:

"Uncle Rob,

"Life is simply impossible at Devon Place since you and Di broke up. I want you to tell her this, from me, and that I'm going away until something is done about it. I don't want either of you to be unhappy on my account, but we could at least meet and talk it over like intelligent people. I have plenty of money and will be all right, so don't

worry about me. I have a friend who will inform me as soon as you and Di are under one roof again, and then I will return, so long as you promise there will be no rows.

"If you call in the police I shall, of course, hate you for ever.

"Love, ELIZABETH."

"I could wring the minx's neck!" Robert decided, so lost in his plans for punishing the runaway that he failed to see Matron had joined him, having heard from Sister Yates that he was still on the premises.

"You're late, Robert," she said softly. "Wouldn't you like to come through to the flat for a drink?"

"No. No, thank you, Joan," he said hastily. "I have things to do, things on my mind."

She was glancing at the memo pad beside the telephone.

"What are you doing with the address of my cottage, Robert?" she asked lightly. "Don't tell me you're resorting to assignations with some lady or other?"

"Your cottage?" he asked quietly. "What do you mean?"

"It is my cottage, truly. I spend my time off from the clinic there, and occasionally I rent it out for short periods." She tried to smile like a broad-minded woman of the world. "Actually Hugh has been asking for the keys quite regularly lately. He's been carrying on with someone. I feel rather naughty for allowing them to use Holly Cottage, but"—she shrugged—"they would only go elsewhere, I suppose."

Rising to his full height, Robert said coldly, "My wife is dining there this evening. Have you anything to add or retract from your various statements now, Joan?"

She flushed and said, "No. I knew about it all the time. Didn't you?"

"Know about what?" he insisted.

"Your wife and Hugh, of course," she suddenly lashed him. "You're a fool if you didn't suspect them, Robert, but they've taken all the rope I've paid out to them. She's not good enough for you, can't you see? If you must have a wife, choose someone you can trust with all your affairs, who will never, as God is my judge, let you down. Listen to me, Robert!"

His expression had changed until it almost shuddered with loathing.

"Joan, be quiet!" he commanded. "I can't stand your unhealthy obsessions

any longer. Your resignation from this clinic will be expected, and accepted in the morning. Now, goodnight!"

She caught his arm as he would have passed, clawing at him like a wild thing. "You—you can't mean it?" she at last pleaded. "Look what I've done for you—for the clinic!"

"Subject to your interests being served also, I believe?" he enquired. "Let me go, Joan. You can apologise later to my wife."

What Joan had suggested could not be true, he told himself, as he drove home. Diana would never, never lend herself to such things while she still bore his name. He had been jealous of so very little that he couldn't bear to think of her as guilty in the final capitulation, and with a man like Hugh. No—he looked squarely ahead. He was going out to the cottage, and, though the scene looked set for all as Joan had hinted, he refused to believe ill when his own heart told him over and over again that he had injured his love much more desperately than Hugh Redbarn would be allowed to do.

It had been arranged that Diana should arrive early at the cottage and begin to prepare the meal for which Hugh assured her he had provided. Therefore she had the key in her possession and dismissed the taxi she had hired, knowing she would be fully occupied for an hour or so; too fully, she hoped, to have time for grieving or repining.

As she put a match to the fire laid in the sitting-room grate she pondered that already it seemed an eternity since she had left Devon Place. She had called to collect the residue of her belongings, feeling a stranger where so recently she had been wife and mistress. One blotched postcard from Liz was the total sum of correspondence she had received from the Scottish highlands; it was as though she was more easily forgotten than she was able to forget, and though she tried to lash up her anger against Robert in his unforgivable attack upon her, she allowed for the fact that fate had apparently conspired to make her look guilty in his sight—the business at Southerton, for instance—and he would probably neither know nor care that in her sight he was the most attractive man in the whole world, and would remain so, to her dying day.

She discovered that Hugh had provided a pre-cooked chicken, which

merely needed heating through in its foil wrapping, and as the vegetables were frozen, they, too, were cooked, and required heating approximately fifteen minutes before the start of the meal.

There was a bottle of wine which she put in the living-room to acquire room temperature, and then she felt a little lost, wondering what to do to fill in the time.

While she was thus unoccupied the doorbell jangled suddenly, making her jump. Hugh had said a little after eight, and it was a little before twenty-past seven at the moment.

Her knees turned to jelly as she beheld Robert's proud, strangely uncommunicative countenance beholding her from the cottage porch.

"Good evening!" She fingered her necklace nervously. "Won't you come in? Where . . . ? How did you know I—I was here?"

"Redbarn," he said in a peculiarly staccato voice. "I came early. Thought I would be too early and then I saw the lights. Where is he?"

"Who?" Diana asked, wondering if all this could be true and not daring to question her luck.

"Redbarn," came the same staccato tones.

"Oh, he'll be along later," Diana said, without turning a hair. "I came ahead to see to the cooking."

"You once—" he said slowly, as though the interior of the cottage interested him profoundly—"took over the cooking at my place. Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember," she said quickly. "That was really a very pleasant evening. Why did you want to see me, Robert?"

Still he wasn't ready to answer, apparently, for he ignored her question and asked another himself.

"Where were you at six o'clock this evening?"

"I would be at my digs. I'm staying at a small private hotel."

"Oh. You don't appear to have told anyone about our—er—separation."

"No. I'm not exactly proud of it. I suppose I'll get around to it one day."

Robert now began to reveal the agitation he was feeling by backing into a lamp standard and knocking a pile of books from the occasional table into which he lurched.

"I realise, of course, that you won't be staying the night here," he said, his

voice peculiarly strong and vibrant as though it spoke in spite of him.

"You're correct in that assumption, Robert," she said, still wondering what all this preamble was leading up to.

Suddenly he was unaccountably beside her on the rug in front of the blazing fire, holding her hands and saying ridiculous, foolish, over-emotional things like: "Diana, I love you, I adore you, I'm lost without you. I want you back and realise you must hate me for all that has happened. Tell me to abandon hope and I will. But tell me . . ." he kissed her hands, but didn't trespass further. She had never before seen him unmasked of his absolute serenity. "It's been hell," he told her in utter desolation.

"Robert!" She didn't know what to say, or how to begin to say it. "Why are you here? How did you really know?"

"I had to find you. There was some emergency or other cropped up." He suddenly realised what the emergency was and decided it could wait. "Joan has been saying that you've spent weekends here with Redbarn, so I sacked her. I told her you would expect an apology."

"Robert!" She felt breathless suddenly. "Why didn't you believe her after all you thought of me yourself?" she wanted to know.

"I simply couldn't, because I've had the privilege of getting to know you to— to some extent. And I was jealous because you went to work for Redbarn, and imagined the rest. Well, here you are, and he's expected and yet I'm like the monkey who resolutely sees no evil. What more can I say?"

Tears were actually in her eyes by now.

"You've said enough, Robert darling," she said softly. "And I love and adore you, too." She buried her face in his lapel and it was with some difficulty that he prised her chin up so that he could both kiss her tears away and seek her quivering lips with his own.

"We made the same mistake again," he felt he could now smile as he held her to him. "We've been talking too much. I especially."

"I want to talk a little more," she said tremulously. "You haven't asked, but I want you to know that when Hugh comes he will be accompanied by Claire, his ex-wife. It's they who

have been occupying the cottage of late, and it was after remarriage was first broached between them that Hugh's affection spilled over on to me and Liz saw us. Apart from that he hasn't laid a finger on me since I worked for him."

"Dare I hope you can ever forgive me, Diana?" Robert asked humbly.

"There's nothing to forgive," she assured him. "I suppose if you hadn't cared you wouldn't have been quite so outspoken. Now what's to be done about it all?"

"Will—will you come back to Devon Place?" he asked uncertainly.

"Tonight," she assured him, "if you wouldn't mind detouring past my hotel to get there?"

"Wonderful!" He hugged her and then said darkly, "I want us to be properly married—in a church."

"In good time," she told him serenely. "I have an idea the Church will have a real union to bless by the time we get there, and I won't be wearing white."

Her lowered eyes, her blush, her quivering lips intrigued him. He suddenly swept her up in a madness of desire from which she was spared by the sudden pandemonium of the ringing telephone bell.

It was Hugh. He wanted to know if she had had an unexpected visitor.

"Tell him Yes," Robert urged.

"I have," Diana told the mouth-piece.

"Well, Claire and I aren't coming. I didn't like the look of him earlier or the sound of him later. He's out for trouble."

"Tell him I found it," Robert pressed relentlessly. "Tell him we aren't missing him one bit."

"Everything's all right, Hugh," Diana assured the other. "We'll just eat some dinner and then leave. There's no trouble."

She replaced the receiver, still smiling.

Robert, however, had gone strangely grey all at once.

"I've just remembered," he said, rummaging in his pocket, "with all that talk of trouble. I'd forgotten this. Read it."

Diana read Liz's ultimatum and then, to his surprise, sat down and laughed until tears flowed from her eyes.

"I was nearly frantic about her before I met you," he said at length. "Why do you laugh, Diana?"

"Perhaps because you'd forgotten

to be frantic and have only just remembered, darling," she told him. "But I'm sure there's nothing to be frantic about. Liz is in perfect control of the whole situation, as has just been proved. We are 'together again', aren't we?"

"Bless you, Di!"

He kissed her again, without haste, and, in her self-imposed exile, Liz was furious when her "spy" informed her that Devon Place was still unoccupied—by either party—at midnight.

"I think you're both selfish and mean," Liz decided for the umpteenth time. "I feel like the 'invisible woman' at times, as though I don't exist for you any more."

"You exist all right," Diana said pithily, "but you *are not* coming with us to Majorca. Now if that's quite clear we can get on with making arrangements for your weekends while we're away."

"I wouldn't get in your way, one little bit, Di," Liz wheedled. "You could persuade Uncle Rob. He would listen to you."

"You know," Diana dimpled, "I'm not so sure he would. But we can try if you insist. Robert," she called clearly, "would you consider Liz accompanying us on our honeymoon if she promises to be good?"

Robert made a sound like an ill-natured bull and Liz paled suddenly. Since she had, with the best intentions in the world, run away to stay with Delia while leaving Tom Dawkes to watch the home fort for repercussions on her disappearing trick, she hadn't quite known how to handle Uncle Rob.

It wasn't Tom who had phoned to tell her the time was ripe for her return: it was Uncle Rob who appeared in person, apparently very angry and unwilling to discuss his more personal affairs with her, of all people.

"You dare to do anything like this again, my girl," he informed her, "and I shall wash my hands of you. You can't imagine the ecstasy of these past two days without you!"

With this she had to be content. She wasn't given any credit for the fact that Diana was there at Devon Place as though nothing had happened, or rather as though something *had* happened, because both adults were suddenly, unaccountably bemused by the sight of each other, and were falling on one another's necks all over the place. If

Liz had need to complain of lack of demonstrations of affection between them previously, there was certainly no need to do so now. Also when she had gone to have her usual early morning "natter" with Diana, she retired hastily from the bedroom when she realised that both Mrs. and Dr. Taunton were occupying the one bed and still soundly asleep. They didn't, in fact, rise until almost eleven, which was, to Liz's way of thinking, carrying things a bit far, and when they were up and about she felt like a gooseberry, and had it not been for the fact that she was a growing girl, and hungry, it was extremely doubtful whether they would have bothered to see that she was adequately nourished.

Cherith Redbarn had been showing off—at school—about her parents' remarrying, having apparently accepted the inescapable fact that her personal blessing on the union was neither expected nor required; when Liz had also announced that she was to be guest of honour at her guardians' wedding.

"But I thought they *were* married?" Delia had enquired.

"So they are, but this is a church 'do'. A bit of a bore, really. It's not even going to be a proper wedding, anyway—just a blessing, as they're legally married already."

Still, Liz had benefited by a delightful new dress in petal blue velvet, supported by a pink, bouffant petticoat; she also had a pair of blue calf, medium high-heeled shoes, something she had been coveting for months.

Diana wore a daffodil yellow suit, and was so obviously happy both before and after the "wedding".

Now they were still ignoring their responsibility—Liz—and planning to spend an extended honeymoon in Majorca as though she didn't exist.

"I have a jolly good mind to run away for good," she sulked, as Uncle Robert proceeded to tell her why she couldn't go with them to Majorca, without sparing her feelings in the least. "A jolly good mind to."

Later in the day, however, she was summoned into her uncle's study to find him frowning with some concentration over her last report from school. She had been placed twentieth out of a class of twenty-five; naturally she hadn't expected to be applauded for her examination results, unless it be with one

hand only, as Victorian children were, so she had heard.

"Liz," he now said darkly, "you appear to be one degree above a moron in matters academic. You agree?"

"I suppose so, Uncle Rob. I've had other things on my mind. You and Diana, for example."

He pondered her words and then regarded her afresh.

"Is this particular anxiety complex now safely removed, do you think?"

"Oh, yes. Now I'm getting anxious in case you discover you don't need me around any more. I've given you the best years of my life and I'm rather old to put up for adoption now, aren't I?"

"I think you can rest assured, my girl, that you are eternally needed here, though I must ask that you excuse me if I appeared to neglect you for some time while I was busily falling in love with my wife."

"Oh, that's all right," Liz said benignly. "It hasn't been as grim as having you fretting for her."

"And now back to your report," he dismayed her by saying. "What have you to say about it?"

"Taking the broad view," she said uncertainly, "I would like to point out that there were five who did worse than me in the class."

"Nothing wrong with your mental arithmetic," he said reasonably. "I hadn't looked at it in that particular light before." He nodded as he read, as though agreeably surprised, and then looked at her directly.

"Do you really think you could spare a fortnight off school?" he asked.

Liz nearly fell off the chair she was straddling, then she realised her answer must be as honest as the question.

"No, Uncle Robert, if you put it that way," she said regretfully.

"That's my girl!" he said with a smile. "You're in accord with your teachers on that point. But"—he frowned—"I managed to point out to them that you *could* work harder, and would, to make up."

"You did wha-at?" Liz asked incredulously. "Uncle Rob! Am I going to Majorca? Am I?"

He suffered a rapturous display for at least five minutes before he could speak.

"Hold it!" he eventually begged. "You have to work like a beaver for the next two weeks to prove yourself, then, if your teachers are satisfied,

you'll be escorted to London Airport and I'll be waiting at Palma to meet you. Settle for that?"

Again she hugged him.

"Uncle Rob, I *love* you! I love Di, too. Why have you been so horrid to me?"

"Because one is periodically 'horrid' to people one loves, Liz, for some obtuse reason or other. But I'm wonderfully happy nowadays, and I—" they both looked towards the doorway where Diana was framed, regarding them indulgently.

Liz made herself scarce to plan her wardrobe for the unexpected trip to the Mediterranean, and immediately Robert and his wife—now no longer in name only—entwined with the naturalness of perfect need and understanding.

After a few moments, as she sat on his lap, she said dreamily:

"Robert, I don't know what to do for the best. I'm torn this way and that."

"That's my Diana," he smiled, kissing the top of her shining head. "Always at some crossroads or other. What's the big decision this time?"

"Whether to start work at the clinic in March or leave it until after August, darling."

He looked astounded.

"But I thought it was all arranged?" he urged.

"I know," she wriggled slightly, "but it's going to be an awful distraction making two starts, isn't it? Obviously I'm not going to be able to work during August."

He tried to follow her thought-track, failed and regarded her afresh.

"What the heck's happening in August?" he demanded.

It was her turn to look at him, then her eyelids drooped and her mouth quivered expectantly.

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked. "I mean Liz gave us her blessing and then it just happened."

"What happened?" He almost shook her.

Men! she thought in exasperation. They want everything put into words of one syllable!

"In August, darling," she explained simply, trying to ignore the scarlet flooding of her cheeks, "we're having a baby. I have thought it might be so for some time, but now there can be little doubt of it. I—I hope you're glad, Robert?"

He had grown pale, she noticed in concern, and his eyes had the faraway look of one who is about to faint. She slid off his lap and slapped his cheeks gently, to restore him, if necessary to consciousness.

"Darling, are you all right?" she wanted to know.

He rose with difficulty and rubbed his eyes before he turned to her with a faintly idiotic smile on his usually serene, handsome face.

"Diana, are we really . . . ?" he pleaded, then his man's strength returned and he crushed her to him with such force that both generations were temporarily in danger of extinction by suffocation. "Glad isn't the word. I don't know what to say only that it isn't possible to love you more than I do already. Oh, my darling, I know we went into marriage with all the wrong ideas, but things are now so right I feel like recommending our method to others."

She kissed him and raised a warning finger.

"Don't you dare! Love is still the best, the old fashioned way. We had to wait for love, but others won't be as patient as we thought we were."

"I was never patient," he denied. "I nearly kept you in bed with me that first time when Liz drove you there!"

"Now he tells me!" she informed the room. "I nearly decided to stay."

Laughing, they clung together, planning honeymoon and their expected parenthood in alternate sentences.

Liz decided they were particularly pathetic in their mutual adoration that evening, and wondered if they thought she was as big a fool as they were. Already, in her imagination, she was wheeling a very smart black pram down the main road and into the park, and quite enjoying the excursion.

"I suppose they'll get around to telling me before it happens," she nodded magnanimously.



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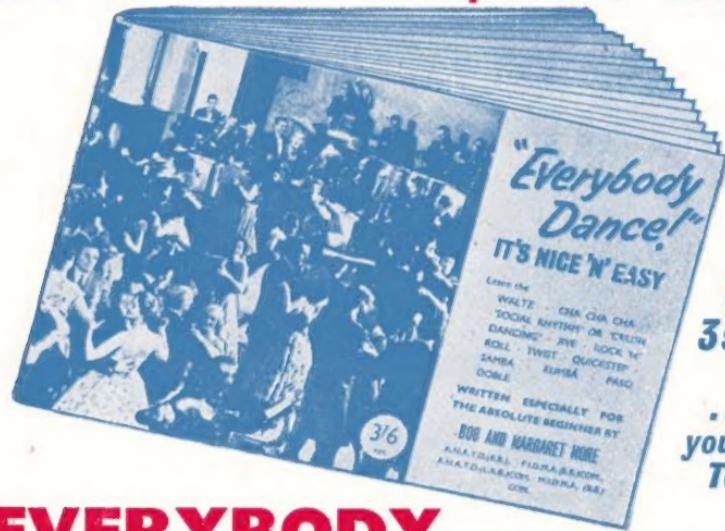
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